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June 22, 1880.

Vol. VI.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 152.

BLACK BESS, WILL WILDFIRE'S RACER; or, Winning Against Odds.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "WILL SOMERS," "PHIL HARDY," "PICAYUNE PETE," "DETECTIVE DICK," "HANDSOME HARRY," ETC., ETC.



WITH A WILD WHOOP PETE PASSED THEM, DARTING BY LIKE A FLASH.

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CHAPTER I.

A MEETING AT THE BELL.

To any one accustomed to sporting life in Philadelphia, the name of the "Blue Bell Inn" will be as a household word. Particularly to those fond of horses, and of the pleasures of the race-course, the name of the "Bell," and of its genial proprietor, Charley Lloyd, must call up pleasant reminiscences of the past.

It is seated on the extreme edge of Philadelphia, at the foot of a gentle declivity, near the suburban village of Paschalville, and close to the borders of a winding creek which forms the southern boundary of the city.

In front of the long, low porch of this noted hostelry, on a fine day in the latter part of September, was collected a group of sporting gentlemen, to judge from their dress and the subject of their conversation.

One of them, a gigantic figure, considerably over six feet in height, and of magnificent muscular development, was just lighting a cigar, and listening to the animated conversation of the group.

Drawing up a chair, he seated himself in a lazy attitude, and puffing a volume of smoke from his cigar, quietly remarked:

"I don't know that I'd mind riding the race myself. It's a little past my jockey days, no doubt, but I've a notion I could get some speed out of a horse yet."

A volley of laughter followed this remark.

"Out of an elephant, you mean," exclaimed one of his friends. "The idea of Pierce Browning on the course! I pity the poor animal that has you to carry."

"Now don't be laying that flattering unction to your soul," retorted Pierce, quoting from Shakespeare. "If you think a horse can't carry me, just ask Will Wildfire about the time I took him down the steep road to the Falls bridge. Will's a bold chap, to be sure; but I'll be hanged if he didn't turn the color of whitewash that day."

"You needn't be advertising yourself," rejoined Ben Huntly, another member of the party. "We all know you have the devil in you when you are stirred up. I would sooner ride behind a bareback circus performer, than Pierce Browning when he's in his wild humor."

Pierce laughed, and tilted his chair back, with his feet up on the porch railing.

"Me! Why I'm a very baby behind a horse. I'll sue you next for defamation of character."

"And I'd much sooner risk paying damages that way, than getting damages behind your bays," retorted Ben. "But, by the way, what has become of Will lately? I have not seen him these three weeks."

"Oh! he's alive and kicking," responded Harry Waters, whose slim, alert figure was leaning easily against a post. "I have a notion, though, that he has a touch of woman on the brain. He seems to be getting dreadfully sweet on his fair friend, Clara Moreland."

"All flirtation. Flirtation, every scrap of it," cried Pierce. "Will is not a marrying man. And, speaking of that, do you know that the fair Clara has entered her gallant black for next week's steeple-chase?"

"The deuce she has!" ejaculated Ben, with a whistle. "Not going to ride him herself, I hope?"

"If she did I'd bet my bottom dollar on her," replied Pierce, "for she can ride like Jehu, when her blood's up. I don't forget the time she led me a jolly chase past the Park guards, and laughed at me in the bargain. I doubt if there is another woman in the city that can hold a candle to her on horseback."

"By Jove, if she rides I want to be there!" remarked Charley Lloyd, the host, joining the party. "But are any of you gentlemen entering horses for the October races? There is going to be some fine sport afloat on that occasion, if I am not much mistaken."

"There'll be jess the cutest ridin' you never see'd!" remarked a gray-haired negro hostler. "An' I knows a p'int or two 'bout de course; for I's been dar."

"You bet he has!" assented the host, energetically. "What Pomp don't know about horses ain't worth knowing. Why, he was weaned on them; and has jockeyed more races than any other man of his age in the country."

"Is *rid* more races," protested the old fellow, a little offended. "Neber jockeyed a race in my life; and, bress de Lord I neber will! Dat sort of fun ain't in dese ole bones."

"Oh! it is all right, Pomp, I was only joking," replied the good-natured host. "But, how is it, gentlemen; have any of you made entries for the races?"

"Ask Pierce Browning. He's the only horse-fancier in the crowd," rejoined Ben Huntly. "For me, my strong hold is a pair of oars."

"And I never owned a racer in my life," responded the indolent giant. "A quiet family-horse, now; an easy-going pacer, warranted to stand locomotives, and to start at nothing except a bunch of hay."

That's my ideal of a horse. None of your break-necks for quiet Pierce Browning, say I."

A general laugh followed, as Pierce drew himself up with an air of offended dignity at the idea of being taken for a sporting character.

"At any rate Will Wildfire has made an entry," continued the host. "Black Bess is down on the books for the races."

"That's cool in Will!" cried Pierce, rising to his feet excitedly. "Does the boy want to be cleaned out? Why, the best horses in five hundred miles round are entered. There's Lady Clare and Rover—what does he expect to do against such noted thoroughbreds?"

"Don't you worry," rejoined the host, laying his finger mysteriously aside his nose. "Will's a young blood, who knows what is what. There's better metal in Black Bess than is generally known. I wouldn't say this only I know you're his friends. But I've had the lass in training. What have you to say for her, Pomp?"

"Sooner let her say it for herself," replied Pomp, with the same show of mystery. "Only, if I was young enuff to ride her, I'd make some folks open dere eyes at de races, dat's all."

"Why, she has none of the points of a racer," protested Pierce. "I have not seen her stepping out; but the very build of the horse is enough for me."

"Appearances are deceitful, sometimes," suggested Charley. "Spirit is of more account than shape, any day."

"And who denies that?" cried a cheery voice from the road, as the tread of a horse came to the ears of the preoccupied group.

All eyes were instantly turned toward the speaker. They saw a tall, well-built, and well-dressed figure, with a very handsome, frank, and engaging face, whose youthfulness of appearance was added to by the faint lines of a budding mustache.

He was seated on a large-framed horse, which he drew up in front of the "Bell" as he spoke.

"Will Wildfire, or Old Nick never comes when he is called!" ejaculated Pierce. "Jump down, boy. We are talking of you and giving you anything but a good character."

"All right. Talk it out, if you want. Talk never broke a man's bones," Will cheerily cried, as he sprang with a light bound to the earth.

Evidently the dashing young fellow was a favorite with the gray-haired jockey, from the haste with which the latter bustled up to wait upon him.

"He only wants a minute's breathing, Pomp. He's just from his oats," explained Will. "How are you, fellows? Glad to see you, Harry! Hey, Ben, I heard how you laid out Jack Price last week. Wish I had been there. Hallo, Pierce! How's this? Why don't you bring him out a sofa, Charley? It's a confounded shame to leave him there on his feet."

"Do you think they could carry a better man?" retorted Pierce. "Why, hang you, boy, you will have people bidding for me for a lazybones next. If you give me the name, shoot me if I don't have the game; so fetch along your sofa, landlord."

"Haven't got any your measure," replied the host, looking comically at Pierce's six feet three.

"Is this all true we hear, Will?" asked Ben. "Are you entering Black Bess for the Fall races?"

"Oh, yes," replied Will, indifferently. "She can't be any more than beat you know. And she will have plenty of company in that."

"Tell that to the horse marines!" ejaculated Pierce. "You can't come the don't-care game on me. Will Wildfire is not the chap to go in for a sure beat. You're calculating to win, you villain, or you'd be very clear of entering."

"I can take my chance in the crowd," Will smilingly replied.

"But do you know the blood that's against you? There's Lady Clare to trot against, for one."

"Oh, hang Lady Clare! She's got a name. But a name ain't always a game. Come, fellows, I'm as dry as a pitcher plant. Let us have something to wet our whistles."

There was no objection raised to this proposition, and they entered the bar-room in company.

"What will you drink?" asked Will, as they stood together at the bar.

"Ale for me," responded Pierce.

"I'll try that prime old Madeira," said Harry Waters, indicating the bottle with his finger.

"And bless you all, gentlemen. I won't mind a mouthful of old rye."

They looked around to see who was the owner of this hoarse voice. There stood a blear-eyed, ill-favored old toper, who had silently ranged himself at the bar beside them.

"Get out now, Jake," cried the host severely. "I will not have you disturbing my guests."

"Didn't this gemman call up the company?" retorted the old chap, in an offended tone. "I'll take three fingers of old rye, for mine."

Will turned and looked at the trembling hands and bloated face of the incorrigible old drunkard.

"I don't think he would be a good subject to waste a temperance lecture on," said the young man, with a short laugh. "He is bound to drink himself into the grave, so I suppose I may as well help him to a nail for his coffin. Give him a nerve-steadier, Charley."

The landlord silently handed out bottle and glass. The old chap, nothing loth, turned out a brimming draught, and poured down the burning liquor as if it had been so much water.

"Thank you, gemmen," he muttered. "That's good for an honest old feller's bones. Yer ain't got the nails in old Jake's coffin yet."

There was a sinister look on the old chap's face as he turned away. He was evidently treasuring up Will's words spitefully against him.

Little cared Will for that, however. He was too

young to fully realize the truth of the old saying that a mouse can help or hurt a lion.

In a few minutes more the whole party were on the road, Will on horseback, the others in the carriage in which they had come to the Bell.

As they rode off toward the city they gave little thought to the old toper, who was muttering revengefully to himself:

"Mebbe old Jake mought get some nails in your coffin fust, bold as you are."

CHAPTER II.

OLD AND YOUNG JOCKEYS.

Not more than half a mile from the locality of our last chapter, on a rising point in the road that led to Darby, stood a modest brick house, fronting the road to the west, and eastwardly looking far over the broad flat meadows through which wound the Schuylkill river, on its way to the not distant Delaware.

The house was not particularly inviting in appearance, the only evidence of taste about it being a few of the common garden flowers, which grew in the front yard, while a small kitchen garden extended in the rear.

Leaning over the fence was a stout-built, sinister-looking fellow, dressed in plaid pants and a well-worn knit jacket. Yet there was something of the sport about his general aspect, and in the jaunty way in which he wore his hunting cap. His whiskers were of the "mutton chop" pattern, adding to the general English contour of his face. He held between his teeth a well-colored meerschaum, from which he was sending clouds of smoke into autumnal air.

"I'll go a cow and a brace of sheep that I know the cut of that chap's jib," he muttered, looking toward a horseman, who had just turned a bend in the road, not far away. "A blazing little dandy he always was; but he's got some blood in him, I'll say that for Mark Preston."

The rider came rapidly up. He was of a small figure, one of those wiry builds that are apt to make up by agility for lack of strength. He was dressed with a neatness that closely approached to foppishness, while his long and well-waxed mustache gave an air of affectation to his otherwise good-looking face.

Drawing up his horse to a walk as he ascended the slight declivity, he approached the spot where the man with the pipe seemed to await him with some curiosity.

"Glad to twig you, Mr. Preston," he cried, as the horseman came nearer. "I'll be hanged if you don't always manage to look as neat as a new pin. I believe you could roll in a mud-puddle, and come out as if a tailor had just let go of you."

"I wish I could say the same for you, Luke," remarked the horseman, as he checked the animal and brought him to a full stop.

"Me! Oh, I'm a rough diamond! You better not waste any rose-water on me."

Mark laughed as he sprang from his horse, and threw the rein over a paling of the fence.

"How's business?" he asked.

"It's darned mean," was the reply. "Everything's gone wrong, since—"

"Since you and I went into partnership, eh?"

"Well, anyhow, ever since I tried to get even with that college snipe, young Wildfire. Blast him, he warped my cash first, scorched my back next, and last of all I burnt up all my furniture trying to scorch him back."

"But you got the insurance."

"Nary insurance," rejoined Luke, shaking his head. "I was a bit afeared to push matters in that quarter, you see; for there was some talk of sending me to Cherry Hill as a house-burner.—No, blast him, it all went; and here I am, trying to pick up a living in an honest way."

Mark looked into the hardened face of the man before him, and laughed significantly.

"You are not ditching, anyhow," he said.

"No, I ain't come to that yet."

Luke replaced the meerschaum in his mouth, and puffed out its smoke with a complacency which indicated that his physical labors were not of a very pressing kind.

"Look here," resumed Mark, with a cautious glance around him, "I don't know how you feel; but for me, I have no notion of letting up on Will Wildfire yet. Don't talk about the scorching he gave you—look how he laid me out! Hang it, Luke, if I had got hold of Wildflower Hall, which is mine by right, I would have made a royal berth there for you."

"Much you would!" cried Luke, with a contemptuous laugh. "None of that taffy. I ain't that kind."

"I'll swear I would," persisted Mark. "But that ain't here nor there. I can't give what I haven't got. But I'll tell you what it is, my boy, there's something of the hornet in me. I can sting twice in the same place. What say you? Shall we go for Wildfire if an opening offers?"

"I'm your crow for a thousand!" ejaculated Luke, striking his rough hand into the white palm of the man before him.

"Do you know," he continued, "it's part that which brought me out here? I wanted to be near Wildflower Hall, and keep an eye open for chances."

"There may be a chance before we are much older," suggested Mark, mysteriously.

"I'm in with you, then, root and branch. And can get plenty of help if it is wanted."

"The young blood is going it heavy on horses," continued Mark. "And I've got a notion he's calculating to make a sweepstakes at the Suffolk Park

“I've seen her,” responded Luke. “A regular slab-sided, crook-kneed specimen. She's as black as the ace of spades. But color don't win in a horse-race like it does in a game of faro. She ain't got one point of a racer about her.”

“Then if he can be led on to bet heavy on her speed— But do you know a good horse when you see one?”

“Me know a good horse?” ejaculated Luke, with astonishment. “Me, that was at every Derby for ten years, and that's seen every blooded animal that's got a pedigree worth a farthing? You bet I ain't the chap to back my money against a cart horse for a racer. Just take my word for it, there ain't an ounce of genuine blood in Black Bess.”

“Blood be fizzled!” came a hoarse voice near them. “The chap as says she can't trot don't know a bean from a punkin, an' I don't keef if his name's King George! Don't tell me!”

It was with a start of guilty surprise that the two confederates looked around. There, before them, was the bloated face and ragged attire of old Jake, the surly old toper who had, an hour or two before, pushed himself on Will Wildfire and his friends.

“You kin put this in your pipe,” continued the old chap. “Charley Lloyd has had her in training, and be ain't wastin' his time on no slouches. If Black Bess can't trot then there ain't no go in a locomotive, that's all.”

“Hallo! Jake; is that you?” cried Mark. “And drunk, as usual.”

“Ain't had but a brace o' nips to-day, as I'm an honest old sinner.”

“But didn't you swear off for the year? You told me yourself you did.”

“So I did,” rejoined Jake, “An' I kept it too, right squar' through. There ain't no slidin' round corners on a swar-off with old Jake; now you bet!”

“Kept it? Why the year ain't done yet.”

“Tell you what it is,” said Jake, mysteriously. “There was a bit of a blunder in that business. I got deceived by Charley Lloyd's clock; an' that's how it is I ain't giv' up smiling.”

“Deceived by the clock, hey?”

“It was half an hour past, you see. I calkerlated to swar' off at twelve o'clock, New Year night, an' nick me if I didn't do it at half past eleven! So you see it was last year 'stead of this. I kept it, too, straight up, like a man, fur the rest of the year. 'Tweren't my fault if the blamed year pegged out so soon. A feller can't be held 'sponsible for every-body else's clocks.”

His two auditors laughed heartily at Jake's idea of honor. But the old fellow was as grave as a parson.

“Now don't yer be swallerin' any sich blarney 'bout Black Bess,” he continued. “They ain't a-goin' to publish her fur the go that's in her. But I've seen her paces, and I know a peg or two 'bout hosses. Jist you see if she don't make sweepstakes of the races. I wouldn't lie 'bout her fur a cow, fur I don't like Willfire Will fur nothin'.”

Mark Preston started at this admission, and looked significantly at Luke.

“You don't like him, eh?”

“Not fur a peanut. I'm a gemman, born and bred. I am, if luck has gone 'gin me. He's been a-puttin' on airs, an' I don't low no upstart to play that on me.”

A meaning wink passed between the confederates. The thought struck them both that this old chap might be made use of. He was well known as a hanger-on about training stables, and had the free entree to every locality about the race-course.

“Black Bess can trot, then?” asked Mark, quietly. “If she can't a bird can't fly. Mebbe she ain't got blood. But she's got legs, and them's better.”

The conversation continued in a more confidential tone. The three men gradually closed up together near the fence, their voices falling, while a deep interest in the subject seemed to possess them. They grew so intensely interested, in fact, that they failed to perceive one circumstance of some importance.

But we must go back a short time in our story to properly understand this circumstance.

If we return again to the “Bell” we will find old gray-haired Pomp seated, with elbows on knees, and his chin on his two hands, on a broad stone by the road-side. On a smaller stone near him sits a little chap who seems a miniature copy of himself.

His companion, in fact, is a half-grown negro boy, as black as charcoal, with a wonderfully flattened nose, and eyes that shine like diamonds in an ebony setting. But it needs no second look to see that the boy is no fool. There is a shrewd look upon his face, and a sharpness of expression which indicate that it would not be advisable to buy him for a minny.

“I tell you what,” said Pomp, with an air of great confidence in the boy, “dar ain't no use talkin', but hoss business is jess alive with tricks. Cain't tell me! It's jess runnin' over with 'em.”

“I allers 'posed de bess hosses beat,” murmured the lad.

“That 'pends that 'pends,” replied the old man, shaking his grizzled head. “Why, dar's more tricks in a hoss-race than dar's beans in coffee. Sometimes de hosses is doctored afore dey get on de track, and sometimes dey is jockeyed arterward. It's all one way. It's de ole betters dat gets it, an' de greenhorns dat's sold. Mought as well put yer nose in a rat-trap as yer money in a race if you don't know de p'int.”

“Bet dar ain't no jockeyin' with Black Bess,” said the boy, confidently. “Marse Will's goin' to pile money on her, an' I's a-goin' to pile her through.”

“You keep yer eyes skinned, Pete,” rejoined the

old man, with a knowing shake of the head. “You ain't larned de tricks yet. When you's rid as many races as I has, den you kin talk.”

“Dey can't beat me stickin' to a hoss, anyhow,” returned Pete.

“You're jess a little monkey at dat,” acknowledged Pomp, looking at the boy as if he took some of the credit to himself. “But dat ain't all. If any 'coon comes 'round you, on de race say, with a hunk of candy, or a plate of nice clams, jess don't you bite. Dat trick were tried on me once, and I got sick as a 'coon in de middle of de race.”

“Will you be dar?” asked Pete.

“Me be dar!” cried the old fellow, with a chuckling laugh. “Me be dar! Why de race couldn't come off widout Pomp. Dunno what it'll be when I'm done laid up with rheumatiz, or git took to de church-yard. Jess you see if dey don't miss de ole man.”

“I'm a-gwine to stick to you,” said Pete. “If dey gits de best of me, den it's all right. But I's a notion, when dey see old Pomp about, dat dey'll sheer off.”

“Jess you bet on dat,” laughed the old jockey. “Dar ain't a rascal dat I don't know like a cat knows a mouse. Hang to old Pomp's coat-tails, Pete, an' de rascals'll keep 'clar of you.”

There was something contagious in the old fellow's laugh. It shook him from head to foot as if a small earthquake had broken loose within him. Pete caught the same disease, and laughed until he rolled off his stone helplessly on the ground.

A half-hour afterward Pete was trudging along the Derby road, still breaking out into a gust of laughter at intervals, as he thought of old Pomp's fun.

“Bet dey can't beat de ole man,” he soliloquized. “Hello! who's dat dar?”

He hurried on, with a boy's curiosity, to try and recognize the man who was strolling on some distance in advance.

It was not long before he knew him as the drunk-en loafer, old Jake.

With a sniff of contempt Pete held back, enjoying himself now with a climb over the fence, now with a long look at the distant scenery.

But, turning a sharp bend of the road, he was surprised to discover Jake in close conference with two men, their talk seeming to be of a very confidential nature.

“By gum!” cried the boy, slapping his knee energetically. “If dat ain't de house whar I seen de English sport, Luke Lister, dar ain't no use talkin'! An' who's dat ole chap? Oh! lawsee! It's jess Marse Mark Preston! It's Pete's ole boss! My bones! won't he go for me if he kin catch me? But Pete ain't dat sort of a fella.”

The boy stood a moment indecisive.

“Dar's deviltry 'mong 'em, I bet on dat. An' it's deviltry 'gin Marse Will, too. Dey'd eat him up widout salt if he wasn't too tough to swaller, den two would. It's jess gwine to fine out what all dat talk's 'bout.”

It needed but a second for Pete to leap the fence into the adjoining field. Arrived there he snaked himself rapidly along behind its shelter. It was not many minutes before he reached the corner of Luke Lister's garden-fence. Here he crouched down behind the close palings, and not ten feet away from the conspirators, in full hearing of their every word.

CHAPTER III.

CLARA MORELAND VEXED, AND PETE SURPRISED.

THERE WAS A narrow front yard and a neat porch to the house by whose railing Will Wildfire had just stopped. But out of the narrow space some tasteful hands had formed a very attractive flower-bed, while a graceful vine twined up the pillars of the porch, lending nature's adornment to the work of art.

In the porch sat a young lady of great beauty, and dressed with a rich taste that added doubly to her charms. She had a book in her hand, which she had been diligently reading, but which she flung hastily down on catching a glimpse of her visitor.

“Do come in!” she cried. “I am ever so glad to see you! I was just thinking of you, and wishing you would come.”

“And you know what the old proverb says,” smiled Will, as he opened the gate and entered.

“No, I don't. And I don't believe in old proverbs, or any such musty old-time nonsense. But I did want to see you.”

“And I wanted to see you,” replied Will, taking her hand, and gazing into her sparkling eyes. “Now that you will let me see you, without that distracting veil, which you used to wear, and the distressing mystery which you used to spread around you.”

The lady laughed, with the merriest and most musical of laughter, as she motioned Will to a seat.

“What a race I led you!” she gayly cried. “And what a dreadful quandary poor Will Wildfire was in! But speaking of races, do you know that some busy friend has entered my name for next week's steeple-chase? I don't know who it was; but I don't thank him a bit. As if I would ride in any such an affair!”

“I would bet on your winning if you did!” exclaimed Will. “That is, if you rode as I have seen you.”

“I only wish my friends would mind their own affairs,” was her vexed reply. “My Selim is entered for the race, and I hardly see how to withdraw him. It is a very unpleasant position to be in, against my will. And I want you to help me out of it.”

“Why, of course,” rejoined Will, a little confusedly. “Anything I can do. I will ride with you if you wish, and help you to push Selim. But he don't need pushing. Haven't I seen him take you over a five-railed fence as though the brute had wings?”

“That does not matter, I certainly shall not take part in this race. You must get me out of it in some satisfactory way. Wouldn't I like an opportunity of thanking the gentleman to whom I owe this pleasant service?”

“I am glad it was not I,” laughed Will. “I fear I might not enjoy the kind of thanks you have in your eyes. But I will see what I can do. How nicely you are fixed here, Clara. I have not been to see you since you moved here, you remember.”

“Of course I remember. Young ladies are not apt to forget such kind attentions. Here I have been—let me see—”

“Just one week to-morrow,” broke in Will. “You need not be trying to stretch it out into a month!”

“Do you know,” she exclaimed, with a sudden change of topic, “I half believe it was Pierce Browning that entered Selim for the race. It would be just like one of his gigantic jokes. I would make him ride it himself, only I have some fear of Selim's back.”

“Pierce! Oh! no, it could not have been he.”

“I would not trust him,” she replied, obstinately. “He is full of his tricks. But do come in. I want you to see the inside of the house.”

She sprung quickly up, and led Will into the hall, rapidly running over the advantages and charms of her new residence, as she pointed out its several attractions.

An hour elapsed ere Will again appeared upon the porch, and, with a warm good-by from his fair hostess, turned briskly up the street, followed by her eyes with a look that had in it more than interest.

Evening was approaching when Will Wildfire found himself riding rapidly along a country road. It was something over a mile beyond the “Bell,” leading out from the main turnpike half-way between Paschalville and Darby, and running westward through a rolling and well-cultivated country.

Just before him there rose, to the left of the road, the gables and chimneys of a somewhat extensive mansion, nearly hidden by a luxuriant growth of trees and bushes, but apparently a place of some importance.

Will sprung from his horse and opened the gate leading into the grounds of this edifice, which was no other than Wildflower Hall, the handsome residence which he had inherited from a rich old uncle.

He looked with some pride on the broad façade of the edifice, as he led his horse up to its front.

“I don't wonder that Mark Preston made a fight for it,” he muttered. “I think I would have fought myself, in his place; but hardly in his way.—Hey! Pete! where in the world are you?”

He was answered by the appearance of the little negro boy whom he lately saw in close converse with old Pomp.

“It's 'bout! It's allers 'bout!” cried Pete, running hastily up. “Gimme de hoss, Marse Will.—Looks like as you's been drivin' him hard.”

“Breathin' him a little, Pete. I shock him out rather sharply along the level above the Bell.”

He tossed Pete the bridle, and turned toward the porch of the mansion.

“Jess wait a bit, Marse Will,” remarked Pete, with a cautious look around. “I's got some'at to tell you.”

“To tell me?” asked Will, with surprise.

“De little nig's been scootin' a bit,” replied the boy, in a significant tone. “Dar's fun in de wind, you bet. Didn't I catch dem three coves a-layin' dar games? Jess you b'lieve it, dat's all.”

“What three coves?”

“Why dar was Marse Mark Preston, Pete's ole boss. Den dar was dat sportin' cuss, Luke Lister. De oder was old Jake, dat low-down guzzler who loafs round de Bell.—Dar ain't none of dem three lubs you much, Marse Will.”

“Not the first two, anyhow,” rejoined Will. “As for old Jake, I have never harmed him, that I know of.”

“Him! Don't you pend on him. Dat cuss'd sell his teeth fer 'nough whisky to soak his gums. He jess b'longs to de lass chap dat gubs him a drink.”

“But what was it, Pete? Did you overhear them concocting some rascality?”

“I see'd 'em,” began Pete mysteriously. “Dey were standin' in de fence corner concoctin'. Dat's a good word, Marse Will; dey were concoctin'. An' I come creepin' 'long and creepin' 'long, for all de world like a snake frew de grass. Fuss 't'ing you knowed dar I was, in de fence corner, and a-hearin' eb'ry word dey said.”

“I don't like that sort of business, Pete,” replied Will, turning away with an air of displeasure. “I want nothing done for me but what is done openly. Let me hear of no more spying.”

“Like to know how yer goin' to catch snakes 'thout scootin'?” answered Pete sturdily. “Tell you what, Marse Will, dar's fun in de wind. You's got to keep your eyes skinned.”

“I want to hear no more about it,” Will sternly rejoined. “Let them try the worst. A man that's ready and able to defend himself like a man need not fear the schemes of a brace of rascals. Let them show their hands, and I fancy they will find their match.—And hark to this, Pete. I will have no spying.”

He turned on his heel and entered the porch, leaving the boy surprised, to say the least.

“Show der hands!” muttered Pete, with a sniff of disdain. “Much dey'll show der hands. Ain't dat sort of buttercups, dem chaps. Why dey'll jess gobble him up like a big turkey'd gobble a worm, ef he goes on dat way. I'm kinder 'shamed of Marse Will—askin' me to let up on 'em! Jess you catch me at it, dat's all! It's a-gwine to ride Black Bess at de races, and I ain't neber gwine to let dem 'coons doctor her. Nary time.”

With a look of intense disgust at his master's lack

of prudence, Pete led the horse to the stables, still muttering to himself.

But we must make a step forward in time, to the date of the great event which had been the talk of sportsmen for a month past—the steeple-chase, which was looked for the last week in September.

The place selected for this race was the broad sweep of meadows, which border the Delaware for miles below the mouth of the Schuylkill, and which, with their frequent ditches, fences and embankments, afford all the difficulty and danger necessary to this peculiar sort of race.

They are, besides, uncultivated, being used only for grass, so that there were no fields of ripe corn, or other late crops, to be trampled down, and no obstruction to the view over the whole broad meadow bottom.

The place of the meet was at the White Horse, a roadside inn, several miles south of Darby, the starting point of the race being a half-mile eastward from the hostelry, and beyond the line of the railroad to Baltimore, which here runs at no great distance from the river.

It was a fresh autumnal morning, with a bite in the air which showed that summer had definitely passed, though the sun shone as brightly as in mid-August.

A group of horsemen had already gathered in front of the White Horse, and was being rapidly added to as horsemen and carriages successively arrived, there being a good show of ladies among those occupying the various elegant vehicles which lent such an unusual air of bustle to that quiet locality.

The house swarmed with people, yielding the hotel folks as much employment as they could conveniently attend to. In front the small group which had gathered early was rapidly increased and extended by other groups of excitedly talking individuals, each as eager concerning the race as if he had his whole fortune staked upon the event.

Of our own special friends the only one yet present was Pierce Browning, who had ridden up on a powerful horse, but who now had taken his favorite position, in a chair tilted back on the hotel porch, where he was surrounded by a small knot of persons to whom Pierce's words were oracles.

"There promises to be a perfect beehive of folks," he said, looking over the gathering throng. "But I'll swear that I haven't seen a half-dozen horses that look to have the spring for this sort of work; and I've been all through the stables. Ha! there's Will Wildfire now; and mounted on a sorry nag that couldn't leap a mud-puddle, let alone an eight foot ditch. He's not booked for the race, that's certain, with such an animal to carry him. Hallo! Will; where did you pick up your antediluvian?"

"Nabbed him just as he was leaving the ark," replied Will, as he joined the group of Pierce's satellites. "I didn't buy him for beauty, you can bet, but for his concealed virtues."

"Hidden so deep that they will never make their way to the surface, I fear," responded Pierce.

"Just wait. Power and beauty are not always linked together. By Jupiter, there's a fine crowd promised! And a good sprinkling of ladies to give tone to the occasion."

"Yonder comes one that you should be interested in," said Pierce quietly, pointing to a lady who had just ridden up on a jet-black horse.

Will looked quickly round, and recognized Clara Moreland, sitting her noble animal with a grace that contrasted favorably with many of those around her, while her beauty was doubly enhanced by the fine color gained by her brisk ride in the sharp September air.

Without replying to his friend Will sprang from the porch and hastened to the fair equestrienne, followed by a quiet smile from Pierce.

"So you have changed your mind," he said, standing at her bridle hand. "You are going to ride."

"Hardly," she replied, "or I would not have given Selim a trot in advance. I wish simply to escape with honor from the unpleasant position in which I have been placed."

"Oh! Selim is good for a burst yet," said Will, patting the glossy mane of the animal.

"But he will not carry me," was her decisive answer. "There are some ladies to ride, I am told; but I certainly do not intend to be one of them. You remember what you promised?"

"Yes, yes," replied Will, hastily. "I must confess, I would have liked to see you ride. But if you are set against it, trust to me. I will contrive some means of getting you out of the difficulty without a square back-down."

"I shall depend upon you. But why are they stopping here? It is near the time for the race."

"Wait till I get my horse. I will accompany you to the field."

In five minutes more Will and his fair friend were riding toward the starting point of the steeple-chase, to which a stream of horses and carriages had now set in.

CHAPTER IV. THE STEEPLE-CHASE.

A SPECIAL train from the city had brought down several hundreds of people to the scene of the race. Also from the neighboring towns of Chester and Darby, and from the country for miles around, spectators had gathered, so that the ground presented an animated appearance before the cavalcade of horsemen and the long line of carriages came to add a new life to the scene.

Most of the horses entered for the race had been in the stables of the White Horse Inn since the preceding day, though some few had been brought over since morning.

The repressed excitement of the throng broke out

into a cheer of wild enthusiasm, as these animals were now ridden into the field. There were eighteen of them in all, many of them beautifully formed and finely groomed animals. Fox hunting had been long a favorite amusement in this part of the country, and horses trained to leap were far from rare. And their riders looked like perfect dare-devils to whom the worst dangers of a steeple-chase would be but sport. They were attired in full sporting costume, and formed a gallant display as they curbed their restive horses, and waited impatiently for the hour of the start.

But what was the surprise of those to whom he was known to see Pierce Browning ride forward and take his place in the line of contestants. He had changed his hat for a close-fitting jockey cap, a blue sash encircled his waist, while his short, tightly-buttoned coat was bottle green in color. The horse he bestrode was a mighty bay, of gigantic pattern as himself, and with a look about him that told experienced horsemen that he was not going to be the last at the goal.

But Pierce wore his old easy look, as if the event of the race was a matter in which he had not the slightest concern. He lounged on his horse as he usually lounged on a chair.

"Oh, yes!" he said to a friend who attempted to break a jest upon him. "I just want to see the affair through. There is no fun in watching only the start or the close. I thought I would ride along and see it out."

"You don't expect to take that elephant through?" "Maybe not. Yes, I'll take a cigar. Have you got a light? There, that's more comfortable. By the way, how much was it you said you would stake against the elephant?"

"I have no recollection of offering any bet," was the laughing rejoinder. "But I wouldn't mind laying two to one that you don't come in fourth best." "Done! for a cool hundred," responded Pierce, reaching out his hand in acknowledgment of the bet.

It was with some surprise that Will Wildfire had seen his huge friend ride into the line of contestants. He was about moving forward to speak to him when he was arrested by an exclamation from Clara Moreland.

"It cannot be possible!" she cried.

"What?" asked Will, turning quickly back.

"Do you not see? Yonder. It is Mark Preston! He has joined the line of racers!"

An exclamation of astonishment broke from Will's lips.

"He! Why, he is no rider."

"Yes, he is. He rides well. I have seen him lead the field in a fox-chase, and take every fence in his way. And his horse is a good one. It cannot beat Selim, however."

"Then why not ride yourself, and distance him in this, as you have in other close races?"

A new look came into Clara's face. Her feeling toward Mark Preston had deepened until it had become a sentiment of hatred. Why should she not ride, if but to vanquish him? There were three ladies already in the line. Her horse had been entered. She had leaped Selim over greater obstacles than they were likely to meet. Her lip curled decisively as she turned to Will.

"I will ride," she said.

"Bravo!" he responded, gayly. "Beat him, and I will be your debtor. I will not be far behind you."

"What, on that horse?" she asked, with a glance of contempt at Will's mount.

"Don't despise that horse. He is a rough diamond. I do not expect to carry the field with him, it is true. But I will not be last."

"You are not entered, though."

"It is not too late for that," replied Will, as he rode away.

A half hour passed, the line of contestants had now somewhat extended. There were twenty-five in all that broke from the start at the word. A shout that made the air ring arose from the throng of spectators, as the cavalcade of animals, in a line as straight as that of a dragoon parade, burst into full speed, and darted across the firm, short-grassed meadow, which formed the opening ground of the race.

But hardly for a minute was this neat line preserved. Some lagged, some darted ahead, almost from the start, while others turned toward what they deemed the most favorable spot to cross the first obstruction, a fence of medium height, several hundred yards away.

Pierce Browning rode, indeed, as if he had no personal interest in the event. He held his horse at an easy canter, seeming to be quite careless that half the field were already well in advance of him.

It was not so with Mark Preston. He shoved his horse from the start, with a nervous eagerness that was not likely to be favorable to his final success.

As for Clara Moreland, she had set out side by side with the other lady contestants. But her lip curved with quiet energy as she saw Mark Preston in the front rank of the race.

"Who follows me?" she cried, pointing forward with her whip. "Yonder is the man I am racing with."

A loosening of the rein, a touch of her white hand on Selim's neck, and the noble animal darted forward like an arrow, reaching the fence almost side by side with her foe.

A new shout rose from the lookers-on as they saw the noble black with his graceful rider, dart like a leopard across the fence side by side with Mark, who took it with equal ease.

She looked back with a feeling of involuntary dread for Will Wildfire. She was afraid his unpromising-looking nag would hang fire at the start. But no. There he rode easily along not far behind her. He cried out warningly:

"Don't push him so on the start. You will break his spirit before the distance is half made."

"I thought you knew Selim better," was all her reply, as she patted the glossy mane of the noble animal, that bounded forward with such long and easy strides beneath her.

Mark Preston, too, looked around. His eyes kindled with a sinister light as he perceived his enemy, and caught the signs of an understanding between him and Clara Moreland.

"Yonder!" he cried, in an excited tone, pointing forward to a wide ditch not far in advance. "You have made the fence. Now for the ditch!"

Will gave a short laugh. He had no idea of entering into emulation with his enemy. But it was not so with Clara. Her blood was fully up, and she, too, pointed to the ditch, exclaiming:

"If you dare!"

"I will dare more than that before I am done with you," muttered the villain, as he turned his horse full on at the leap.

His keen eye had noticed a point of advantage not observed by his fair contestant. The ditch was of unequal width, and the spot at which she had headed was some two or three feet wider than that chosen by her shrewd antagonist.

Will, who caught sight of her error just as she headed at the ditch, was on the point of giving a warning cry, but he restrained himself and looked in mute admiration at the gallant stride with which she brought Selim up to the dangerous leap.

Mark Preston was already over, and he looked back with an air of triumph just as the noble black reached the bank of the broad spread of water. But there was not an instant's hesitation. Selim rose as lightly and gracefully as a bird, darted like an arrow through the air, and lighted safely on the other side, though his hind hoofs sent a shower of dirt rattling into the muddy stream.

"Bravo!" cried Will, as he took the narrower passage which Mark Preston had chosen.

But we must go back to see what has become of Pierce Browning. There was a loud laugh from the lookers-on as the giant rode quietly up to the fence, pulled up his horse, and stood looking at it as if not quite sure whether it was worth his while to attempt a leap. Most of the riders were already across, but the horse of one of them had balked close by where Pierce stood surveying the obstacle.

His eager neighbor sprang to the ground, pulled a bar or two hastily from the fence, and began again to mount his horse.

"Thank you," said Pierce, turning the head of his great steed in that direction, and vaulting over the rail or two left in the panel. "I'll do as much for you at the next."

At the ditch he had still better luck. He struck it at a point where a slight bridge crossed it, over which the great horse went at a ringing gallop.

For some distance now there was an easy way. The broad meadow extended without a break in its smooth expanse. And over its green surface the crowd of racing animals darted. But they were far from preserving the even line of their start. On the contrary a good two-hundred yards separated the leading from the rear horses; while they were extended still more in width.

On the road that ran parallel to the racing grounds was visible a long line of horsemen and carriages, driving rapidly forward, eager to follow the holly-costed race to its close.

A few more trifling obstacles and the first mile of the race was covered. Of those who had started nearly one-half were already out of the race, so far as any chance of winning rested. They had all managed to pass the first fence, but the succeeding ditch had proved a greater obstacle. The fact is, that horses which will easily stride sixteen feet over a high fence, will balk at a ditch not half that width, they being usually timid about water until trained to it. Three or four horses had obstinately refused to leap, and another had fallen and thrown his rider, putting him effectually out of the race. Of the ladies who had started but one remained in the race besides Clara Moreland.

She continued in the first line of racers, close beside Mark Preston, whose every movement she watched with a lip that curled with scorn and determination. The fair Clara's blood was up, and her foe was likely to find it no easy matter to distance her in the race.

As for Will Wildfire his unpromising nag had done unexpected service. He had, it is true, sought easy places to cross the obstacles in his way, but yet he had managed to keep at no great distance behind the leading line of contestants. He rode in an easy fashion as if he felt no personal interest in the race, but was present only as a sort of rear guard to his fair friend.

Pierce Browning rode his great horse with the same careless ease as at the start, though it was noticed that he had made the last few leaps with a readiness that no one had expected. People began to think that there might be more in the horse than they had suspected. He was lagging considerably behind, it is true, but the animal seemed as fresh as if just from the stable. He had not warmed up to his work yet.

"Here's fun!" cried the nearest neighbor of Pierce, pointing forward with his riding-whip.

"What! that low hedge? Why they are making nothing of it."

"No; but there is a heavy plowed field beyond. Some of them are having a deuce of a drag to get through it. And there goes Joe Elliott! Down on his nose for a thousand. I hope his horse hasn't broke his neck."

"The horse is all right," replied Pierce.

"I fancy your animal will have a job yonder. He has too much weight for plowed ground."

"We shall see," remarked Pierce, a smile curling

his lip. "I have not wasted his strength like those blockheads yonder. He will go over it like a bird."

The other laughed at the idea of any thing bird-like about Pierce and his horse. But the next moment they were facing the hedge. It was about three feet in height, and the two horses went over it side by side with graceful ease. But in the plowed ground beyond there was a change. Horse after horse was dragging heavily through it, fetlock deep in the clinging soil. Here the reserve strength of the "elephant" began to tell. The black soil flew from behind his striding heels, as he rushed forward with remarkable speed, rapidly overhauling the struggling horses in advance.

"A race is never settled till the winning post is reached," remarked Pierce, coolly, looking back at his late neighbor, who was fast dropping behind him.

A half mile more, and the chief obstacle of the race appeared before the eyes of the excited riders. This was a broad, deep ditch, level with the field, and varying from fifteen to eighteen feet in width.

Several of the riders hesitated as they came in sight of this formidable obstacle. The foremost horse balked, and could not be made to take the leap. Others rode off to the right and left, in search of a narrower crossing.

The next who approached, a heavy-bearded fox-hunting farmer, drove his horse straight at the obstacle, touching him sharply with whip and spur as he faced the wide liquid reach. The noble animal rose and sprang from his tracks. But his fortune was not in accordance with his courage. His hind legs struck the water, sinking deep in the ditch.

But the experienced horseman was off in an instant, tugging vigorously at the reins, and aiding the struggling creature with all his strength. A minute's hard fight, and the horse was again on dry land, and with his master in the saddle.

"If you dare!" cried Mark Preston, turning to Clara, and repeating her former words, while he pointed tauntingly forward.

Her eyes flashed. She would have crossed the ditch now if she dared for it.

Her foe was a few strides in advance. His well-trained horse rose easily to the ditch, taking him lightly over, though his heels dashed the water.

And then, with a quick turn of the rein, the horse swerved around, coming side on to the point at which Selim was just rising to the leap.

The black hesitated and balked at this obstacle, dropping almost on his haunches in his effort to recover. Clara kept her saddle, however, while a loud, sneering laugh came from her foe.

It was not repeated. For at that instant a huge animal, bestrode by a huge rider, shot past her, and took the leap with a mighty spring. The great beast landed safely on the opposite bank, striking Mark Preston's horse on the flank with his off shoulder.

A laugh of scorn came from the lips of the gigantic rider, as horse and man rolled helplessly to the ground.

"That's a game that two can play at," cried Pierce Browning, for it was he.

The next instant the mighty bay was running like a mettled racer for the goal, only distanced by two of his competitors.

New shouts now arose. The close was reached, two of the fox-hunting farmers coming in as first and second, while Pierce Browning rode in as an easy third.

In a few minutes afterward several others of the racers came in, not latest among them was Clara Moreland, who had again headed her horse at the ditch, and crossed it at a leap. As for Will Wildfire, he had turned away with a laugh from the scene of Mark Preston's misfortune, and was seeking an easier spot to cross.

The fallen man had yet shown no signs of ability to rise again to his feet.

CHAPTER V. THE RACE DINNER.

"Yes, for a good thousand," remarked Pierce Browning, resting his shoulder lazily against the wall. "I don't know but I would have come in first, only I didn't want to take all the starch out of your country riders. A thousand isn't a bad lift for ten minutes' work."

"You might as easily have made it ten," was the reply. "You could have taken any quantity of bets against yourself."

"Thank you. But that ain't my way. Except when I find folks eager to invest their spare cash. I lost a valuable minute, too, in punishing a scoundrel."

"By Jove, but you gave him a settler!" cried the other. "A broken arm or shoulder, I am not sure which. And the poor beast had to be shot. He was simply ruined.—I pity the animal a good deal more than I do the man. There is only one opinion in regard to his conduct."

"Hey, Will!" exclaimed Pierce, as his youthful friend passed. "Where have you stabled your nag? You were not expecting to win a race with that sorry brute?"

"I'll be hanged if I thought it was in you," rejoined Will, turning and shaking the hand which Pierce lazily extended. "Where in the world did you pick up a horse fit to carry your weight at that pace?"

"To tell the truth," replied the giant, almost in a whisper, "I didn't know all that was in him myself until I shook out his speed. The brute surprised me as well as everybody on the field."

"He surprised Mark Preston, I imagine," laughed Will. "But come in. The dinner is set, and the folks are crowding to the table. A deuce of an appetizing set-out, too. The White Horse ain't bad at a race dinner."

It was, indeed, a bustling and attractive scene to which they entered. A table that groaned with good things extended the full length of the dining-room, while another, of equal length, was set in the wide hall.

The seats were already nearly all occupied with the contestants and lookers-on at the race, and the rattle of knife, fork, and spoon, was in full play as Pierce and Will entered.

"Here! Here!" cried a dozen voices. "The head of this table is reserved for our giant rider. For Pierce Browning, the horse-demonisher and man-smasher."

"Couldn't help it," said Pierce, as he slid into the designated seat. "That beast of mine is down on villains, of every grade and color. I could no more have held him in than—"

"Much you tried!" exclaimed a voice from the bottom of the table. "There is no use in advertising yourself as worse than nature made you."

"Oh! I have an indifferent spite against rogues," replied Pierce, easily.—"Yes, a cut of the roast beef if you please.—And let it be rare."

"At all events I have to thank you, Mr. Browning," spoke Clara Moreland, who was seated at the table, a short distance below him. "I escaped by a miracle from being thrown."

"I am only sorry for one thing," returned Pierce, "that it was the horse instead of the man that got a settler.—Shall I trouble you to pass the pepper, sir? Thanks.—Yes, if Mark Preston's neck had been broken—the cheese, did you say?—I doubt if there would have been many tears shed."

Will had found a seat beside Clara, to whose comfort he devoted himself with the most earnest attention. There were many other ladies at the table, and the whole scene was a most brilliant and bustling one.

The rattle of plates and glasses, the eager buzz of conversation, the occasional bursts of laughter, the busy movements of the waiters, contributed to make the affair a success, while the viands disappeared with a celerity that showed there were some noble country appetites present.

"Mine host of the White Horse is a royal caterer," remarked Will. "He has done himself infinite credit."

"Can you reach the salad?" asked his fair friend. "Certainly," replied Will, stretching across the table for the dish. "Shall I not help you to a slice of the chicken?"

"A very small piece of the breast," she answered. "And you must try my favorite dish, Miss Moreland," cried Pierce. "There is nothing like lobster for the nerves. Let me help you."

"No; thank you. I have been very well served."

"But you don't mean to say that after such a neck-or-nothing dash you are going to satisfy yourself with a morsel of a pullet?"

"I would rather not boast of my appetite," she laughingly rejoined. "But I think I have done full duty to the dinner."

"Done your duty!" exclaimed the giant, cutting another huge slice from the round of beef before him. "Heaven help your appetite, if that is what you call doing your duty! I expect to make a famine in the land before I get through. Come, Will, pass up your plate. Here is a mighty sirloin that will never do to retreat from."

"A small slice, then," answered Will. "You have been so busily engaged that you don't know what yeoman service we have performed down this way."

"It does look as if a small cyclone had struck that part of the table," replied Will, with a quizzical look. "One would have thought there was enough to serve a regiment, and now there is only a beggarly array of empty dishes. Yes, I'll give in. I fancied I had an appetite; but when we look upon this picture and on that it is easy to see where the famine has set in."

A loud laugh followed this remark, and a volley of jests followed, rolling from end to end of the table. The devotion to trencher duty at the opening of the feast was, in fact, now giving way to a more dainty choosing of favorite morsels, while the repressed conversation broke out in a lively and rapid parrying of jokes, and in frequent bursts of merry laughter.

"I have not heard a word said about the elephant," remarked Pierce, pushing away his empty plate. "Is there anybody present who is burning to stake his money against that slow-going brute?"

"No, thank you kindly," rejoined a young man below him. "I have already sunk a hundred in my doubt of elephantine speed. I hardly think I will lay any more bets against your menagerie."

"I am open," responded Pierce, leaning back lazily. "If any gentleman is anxious to make a stake off of a poor, over-confident boy, like me."

"When I bet with you again, it will be when birds have quit flying," remarked the young man, laughingly. "I am a victim of misplaced confidence."

The guests were now rapidly leaving the table, and making room for others who had been crowded out from the first spread.

Our friends, too, rose and walked out into the porch.

"Will you not have an ice, Miss Moreland?" asked Pierce.

"No; thank you. What a beautiful view we have from here. What is that distant line of woods?"

"That is far off in the Jerseys," replied Will. "No, you must excuse me. I don't care to smoke."

This last sentence was in response to a suggestion from Pierce.

"Then you will permit me?"

"Certainly. Every man is a free agent out in this country air."

"What was done with Mark Preston?" asked Clara,

turning to Will, as Pierce lounged away to get his cigar.

"Some of his friends took charge of him," was the reply. "I cannot say where they have taken him."

"And was he really badly hurt?"

"Not so badly as he deserved. A broken arm is his worst trouble."

"I do not wish him harm," she rejoined. "And yet I certainly cannot pity him for his hurt."

"Pity him!" said Will, with set lips. "Pierce is right. It would have served the scoundrel right if he had gotten a broken neck instead of a broken arm."

The scene about them was very animated. From within the house the rattle of dishes showed that the feast was still going on with full vim. The porch was filled with those who had been fortunate enough to get to the first table. A constant buzz of conversation and incessant movement gave the charm of activity, while in the broad open space in front a long array of carriages was already in motion, and active horsemen rode to and fro amid the throng, now halting to converse, now pushing forward as if in haste in their homeward journey.

Over all, the bright September sun poured its gleaming light, enkindling the broad sweep of the meadows, the distant woodlands and the flashing waters of the noble Delaware, into a beauty of the most charming type.

"I think I could stay here for hours," murmured Clara, her eyes fixed on the busy and brilliant spectacle.

"And I with you," responded Will, in a low, earnest tone.

She gave a quick glance around. Their eyes met with an earnest look. For a minute they stood in silence.

"Yet there is the necessity of getting back to Philadelphia to drag us away from this charm," she smilingly said. "Had we not better be going?"

"If you wish," he replied.

In fifteen minutes more they were upon the road, Clara's noble black stepping out as briskly as if he had not already done such severe duty that day.

"I have some more respect for that horse of yours," she said, looking at Will's unpromising mount. "He kept up very well with the front rank."

"He is not much to look at," rejoined Will. "But there is good duty in him. I borrowed him for the day from an old fox-hunting neighbor."

"Oh! you have been sailing under false colors, then? But why did you not bring out Black Bess?"

"She is no leaper," replied Will, "and I have better duty laid out for her before many days."

Thus conversing, they rode on, passing many other occupants of the road, and exchanging greetings with numerous acquaintances.

As they neared the city the line of horses and carriages became much thinner, and the voices of the young couple fell into a lower tone, as the pace of their horses was allowed to slow almost into a walk. But this confidential conversation was rudely broken into.

"Come!" cried a cheery voice behind them. "No whispering in company, if you please."

It was the voice of Pierce Browning. The next instant his great horse had pushed up beside them, effectually breaking up any private interview.

CHAPTER VI.

THE EFFECT OF TOO MUCH CURIOSITY.

It was near sundown on the evening of the race when Will Wildfire passed the "Bell" on his homeward journey, crossed the bridge leading over Cobb's creek, and rode slowly along the level reach extending toward Darby. A half-mile in this direction brought him to the foot of a long slope, up which he let his weary horse ascend at a walk.

Near the summit of this acclivity stood a roadside house, which he had often passed without noticing it, but which was not destined to escape his attention on this occasion. It was, in fact, the residence occupied, unknown to him, by his mortal enemy, Luke Lister.

As Will rode slowly past, engaged with his thoughts, and paying no heed to his surroundings, his attention was suddenly arrested by a loud cry, in a voice well-known to him, that seemed to come from some locality near the sky.

"Hey! whoop! hallo! Marse Will!" came the voice. "Yere I is! Way up yere! Top de chimney! Lawsee, Marse Will, I's proper tired of 't; but dar ain't no way to 'squattulate. I's jess a pris'ner."

Will's vision, which had been wandering in all directions for the sound of the voice, now caught sight of an object at which he broke into an involuntary laugh. For there, perched upon the chimney of the house opposite him, looking much like a miniature edition of Kris Kringle done in charcoal, sat his boy Pete, his coat hanging in rags about him, while his original color was by no means improved by a thick coating of soot.

"How in the world did you get there?" cried Will, as soon as he could repress his laughter.

"How in de world is I to get way from yere? Dat's more like it," returned Pete, indignantly. "Guess I'll git down fust fore I 'gin to tell stories."

But we will digress here to tell the story which Pete could well beg to be excused from under the circumstances.

He had, in fact, been for several hours an enforced inmate of the house. About three o'clock that afternoon, after one of his usual confabs with old Pomp, Pete had reached that locality on his way home.

The remembrance of his last visit there, and of the discoveries then made, recurred to him, together with his disgust at his young master's lack of curiosity.

"Pears like as Marse Will ain't got no gumption,"

muttered the boy to himself, as he strolled lazily along the road. "Dar ain't no use talkin' 'bout it. It's really 'shamed of him. Lucky dar's somebody 'bout yere ain't no fool. It's jess s'prising. Dat's what ole Pomp says. It's jess s'prising de way grown folks does carry on. An' white folks, too, as has been to college. Reckon dat's what dey call education. Heugh!"

In this last exclamation Pete threw as much contempt and disgust as he could well express in any single word. He relapsed into silence as he trudged on, but his face still expressed a measure of silent discontent.

But the boy's attention was soon turned to a more interesting subject. He had now reached the turn in the road, from which Luke Lister's mansion was visible. As he did so, he was surprised to see a carriage, with a pair of horses, standing before the door, while several men seemed engaged in carrying some object into the house.

What this was the boy could not determine, though he heard, above the voices of the carriers, some sounds which seemed like loud groans.

Pete's curiosity, which it was never very difficult to excite, was immediately at boiling point. He hurried forward at the top of his speed, but too late to make out the character of the burden, which had now disappeared within the house.

"What's de row?" he asked of the coachman, who was preparing to drive off.

"None of your slack, if you please," returned that important personage. "Get out now, if you don't want to be hurt."

He drove off rapidly down the road.

Pete approached the house, within which all the men had now disappeared. He cautiously peeped in at the door, but there was nobody to be seen.

But his curiosity was by no means allayed by the loud groans which came from some locality in the upper regions of the mansion. To his excited imagination it seemed as if there must have been murder at least, if not some deeper crime.

He crept on and on, drawn inward by some such irresistible attraction as draws the iron to the loadstone. Up-stairs, step after step, he moved with inward trepidation. He turned, ready to leap with one bound down the stairs, as a door opened above, and a step sounded on the floor.

But a man immediately appeared, a stranger to him, and he took heart. It was not the dreaded form of Luke Lister, and he felt no serious fear of any one else.

Pete clung to the balusters as this person approached, and asked, in a dubious tone:

"What's de row? Who's kilt?"

"None of your black business. Dry up now, and get out of this."

But as the man made no effort to put him out Pete held his ground. He began his upward course again, after the man had disappeared down-stairs. In fact the boy's curiosity was now overwhelming. Not even the thought of Luke Lister restrained him in his eagerness to solve the mystery.

The groans, which had now become scarcely audible, appeared to emerge from a room on the second floor, to whose door led a short passage. Along this Pete crept, with the same cautious step, inspired with irresistible eagerness to learn the nature of this mystery, the cause of the suppressed moaning which came from behind that closed door.

Nothing was to be learned through the keyhole, though Pete glued his eye to it with all the skill of a chambermaid or a waiter.

"Oh, lawseel! how's I ever gwine to find out!" muttered the boy to himself.

"Hallo! What's bust here?" came a loud voice behind him, as a strong hand caught him by the collar, and lifted him rudely to his feet. "Keyholing it, hey? you woolly-haired rat! Who the blazes is this impudent little villain?"

Pete had been so occupied that he had failed to hear a quick step behind him, and it was with extreme surprise and terror that he felt this grasp on his collar, and heard this voice in his ear. It was the dreaded accent of Luke Lister.

"It ain't nuffin!" whimpered Pete, shrewd enough, even in his terror, to keep his face turned away. "I'm on'y Marse Brown's boy, down de road. One of his turkeys got away, an' he sent me down yere to look arter it."

"And you were looking for a turkey through a keyhole, eh?"

"Didn't want to 'sturb de family," whimpered Pete.

"Let's see your face, boy. No use to get a kink in your neck trying to screw it out of sight. Hallo! Shoot me if I didn't think so. So it is you, then, you photograph of a total eclipse?"

"Oh course it's me," quavered Pete. "Marse Brown's boy."

"You can't put that on, you confounded little nig," and Luke gave the boy a savage shake. "I know you, like a book. And I owe you a jolly settling before I'll let you slip me."

"Heugh!" cried Pete, with a great show of disdain. "Ain't any two little nigs jess 'like? Nobody neber kin tell one from t'other. Tell you I's Marse Brown's boy, and I's boun' to have dat turkey."

The moanings from the room had ceased during the latter part of the conversation. Now a querulous voice cried out:

"Who is there? Is that the doctor?"

"No," replied Luke. "But I have something else for sore eyes. See here what a prize I have captured."

He flung open the door, and carried Pete bodily into the room, lifting him by the collar as a Newfoundland dog will lift a terrier.

The boy cast his fearful eyes about the room. There had been something familiar to him in the

voice, and all his curiosity was now swallowed up in dread. Nor was he mistaken. There, stretched upon a bed, lay the form of his old master, Mark Preston. His coat was off and his right arm and shoulder tightly bandaged. But the look of pain upon his face gave way to an expression of savage pleasure on seeing the capture which had been made by his associate.

"Aha!" he cried. "So you've nabbed that snipe, have you? That's clever. I owe the black villain something to remember me by. And I want a little amusement to make me forget this infernal arm. Scorch his back for him, Luke. Make him dance. Strap the little vagabond till he capers like a monkey."

"Le'me go! Jess you le'me go! Tell you I's Marse Brown's boy, and I wants dat ole turkey!" screamed Pete, writhing like an eel in the vigorous grasp of his burly captor.

"You don't know me then, Pete?" asked Mark, with cruel malignity.

"Neber see'd you 'fore. An' my name aren't Pete. It's—it's Jake. Jake Brown's my name; an' jess you gimme dat ole turkey, dat's all."

"Oh, yes, we'll give you the turkey; and help your memory at the same time," answered Luke, dragging the boy over to where a thick leather strap lay upon a chair. "We'll have a little music, and see if you are good at a jig."

A shade of pallor showed through all the duskiness of the boy's countenance. He knew the unscrupulous nature of the men into whose hands he had fallen, and that they would have no mercy on him. And he knew as well that there was little use to scream for help. Only occasionally any traveler went past that solitary house. He might be soundly beaten before he could attract any one's attention.

At this moment the roll of approaching wheels came to their ears.

"Dar he comes now!" ejaculated Pete. "You bess le'me go. Dat's Marse Brown's kerridge. He's arter dat ole turkey, you bet."

The carriage stopped at the door.

"It is the doctor," said Luke, listening intently.

"Then get rid of the boy at once!" cried Mark.

"Lock him up somewhere out of sight. We can have it out of him afterward."

A yell came from Pete's lips at this intimation of their malignant intention. But Luke prevented any further alarm by clapping his disengaged hand tightly on the boy's mouth, while he lifted him as a cat would lift a mouse, and carried him up another flight of stairs, depositing him in a sort of garret.

In a twinkling he had tied a thick bandage around the boy's mouth, effectually choking the stream of his eloquence. With equal celerity he tied his limbs, leaving him on the floor in a helpless bundle. The next minute he retreated from the room, locking the door behind him, while Pete remained alone with his by no means pleasant reflections.

The boy, in fact, had no objections to remaining for a while quiescent. He was exhausted with his struggles, and lay, breathing heavily, while from below sounds of steps and voices came to his keen ears.

Some fifteen or twenty minutes passed in this enforced quiet. But at the end of this time Pete began to move uneasily in his bonds.

"Dar ain't no use waitin' yere," he said to himself.

"Tain't plum-puddin' I's a-waitin' for."

The bonds had been placed around the boy's limbs too hastily to be effectual. It was not ten minutes before he had one hand free. Five minutes more completed the task, and he stood upright, in full freedom.

But he was far from being safe yet. The door would not yield to his utmost efforts. There was a fireplace in the room, leading into a wide chimney. Into this he endeavored to force himself, in hopes of making it an avenue of escape. But it proved far too narrow, and he only succeeded in tearing his coat into tatters, and covering himself from head to foot with soot, which seemed the accumulation of half a century.

But one other avenue remained. This was a sort of dormer window, opening onto a steep roof. The boy was agile as a monkey, and was soon out upon this roof, up which he quickly clambered to the ridge.

But he was as far from escape as ever. There was no lower roof visible to which he could descend, no tree he could reach, no strong vine or other means of descent.

He sat here for a full hour, surveying the surrounding country, and determined that if Luke Lister wanted him he might come after him.

At the end of that time the carriage drove away again. But Pete had just seen something of more interest to him. This was the familiar figure of a horseman, approaching from the direction of the city. The boy now climbed upon the chimney, for a more extended observation. He was not mistaken. It was his master, Will Wildfire, slowly ascending the hill.

CHAPTER VII.

LUKE LISTER MEETS HIS MATCH.

LUKE LISTER, the doctor having departed, began to think again of his postponed revenge on Pete. His patient had become much easier in consequence of his arm being set and properly bandaged, and himself suggested a return to the amusement which had been temporarily laid aside.

A muffled sound from above hastened Luke's movements. Pete must have got rid of his gag, and would raise the country by his cries if he was not looked after.

But it was with no small surprise that Luke, on

unlocking the door, found but an empty room before him. His prisoner had disappeared!

"What in the sun has become of the young rat?" he asked himself. "Ha! I see. The window is open. He has worked himself loose and taken to the roof."

A single look proved the truth of this idea. There sat Pete, astride the chimney, looking eagerly down into the road. A grim laugh came from the villain's lips.

"What a little devil it is!" he muttered. "Hey! there, boy? S'pose you just wheel around, and toddle down this way. You're wanted."

"Guess not," saucily returned Pete. "I jess climb up yere to take a look for Marse Brown's turkey. Got to see dat bird 'fore ever I takes one step down."

"Come down, I say," was the imperious order.

"Yere I is," replied Pete. "Guess I won't leave jess yit."

"I'll bet high you do," was the savage response. "If you don't toddle down quicker than lightning, look out for a lift."

Pete turned quickly at these significant words, and found himself looking directly into the muzzle of a pistol. It was a very convincing form of argument. He experienced a sudden change of opinion.

"You needn't be pokin' out yer pistols," he exclaimed. "Don't you see I's a-comin'? Don't b'lieve dat ole turkey's yere, anyhow."

Pete slid along the ridge until above the window, and then let himself glide slowly down the steep slant. He was not particularly afraid of his antagonist, for he had seen movements outside, of which the latter was unaware.

As he came opposite the window, Luke grasped him by the collar and drew him within.

"So, you've been taking an airing, have you?" asked the burly villain. "You need a dusting, now, after being so long on the roof. Come along."

But it was not Pete he held, but only Pete's tattered coat. The boy had slipped like an eel out of the torn garment, and stood grinning at his discomfited foe. He might easily have reached the door and escaped, but he made no effort to do so.

"Guess you mought keep dat coat," said Pete. "Tain't my Sunday best, anyhow."

Luke glared at the tattered and soot-covered coat for an instant, and then flung it fiercely at the boy, making a quick movement at the same time, so as to cut off his escape by the door.

"What sort of a game do you call this?" asked a strong, youthful voice near him. "I never saw it played before."

Luke turned hastily. There, leaning easily against the side of the doorway, stood his mortal foe, Will Wildfire, looking on as quietly as if he really imagined that some new kind of game was being played before him.

For an instant the villain remained stupefied with amazement. Then he burst into a paroxysm of rage, advancing a step toward his foe, and raising his pistol-hand with a fierce threat.

"So you've put your head into the lion's mouth, you infernal hound! This is my house, and my house is my castle. You got in here easy. You won't find it so easy to get out."

He lifted the pistol, with deadly intent in his eyes.

But, during this movement Will had not stirred an inch. He still remained, with his shoulder resting against the door-frame, gazing on his enemy with the cynical satire of his first speech.

"I hardly think you will pull that trigger, Mr. Luke Lister," he quietly remarked.

"Why won't I?"

"Because bluster is cheap; but when it comes to courage you are not there. You had better drop it, and not be making a fool of yourself, as well as a rogue."

"Ha! I am a coward, am I?"

His face flashed with intense rage as he leveled the weapon, with deadly aim, not six paces from Will's breast. But the resolute youth did not move, or change a muscle of his face. His only action was a slight signal with his hand.

At the same instant the villain's aim was sadly disconcerted. Pete had been creeping forward noiselessly, and, at the sign from his master, sprung like a cat at Luke's extended arm. The pistol exploded, but the ball went through the floor.

Simultaneously the quiet young man leaped forward, caught the wrist of his antagonist in a vise-like gripe, and with a quick twist forced him to drop the weapon. Will caught it as it fell, sent Luke staggering back by a vigorous surge against his breast, and the same moment covered him with the muzzle of the captured revolver.

"Two can play at that game, Mr. Luke Lister," he satirically said. "It happens that I hold the winning hand now. What were you going to do with this boy?"

"Dey was gwine to scorch Pete wid a leather strap," cried the boy.

"Is that true?"

"Ask the nigger, if you want to know," savagely replied Luke, flinging himself heavily into a chair.

"It is well for you it went no further," rejoined Will. "I am not much given to threats, but if you ever maltreat this boy I will see that he has the chance to pay you back in your own coin. And when I say a thing I mean it. Come, Pete." He turned his back on his opponent, and walked through the door, with a carelessness that was almost insulting.

"Jess put dat in yer pipe an' smoke it," said Pete, with his tongue in his cheek, as he walked backward after his master. He was not going to trust a treacherous antagonist, however heedless his master might choose to be.

Luke half rose, with the deadly light of revenge in his eyes. But Pete's keen glance was upon him,

and he sunk again into his chair, cowed, despite himself, by the disdainful demeanor of his foe.

Careless of the fierce threats which the baffled villain threw after him Will pursued his way steadily down-stairs and out of the house.

There his horse stood, tied to the fence. Directing Pete to mount behind him, he was off, in a minute more, toward Wildflower Hall.

Two days after the events just recorded another scene, which may have some little interest for the reader, was being enacted in a long, level lane, about a half-mile back from the "Bell."

The road was hard and dry, little frequented, and excellently adapted to the purpose for which it was now being used, that of training.

"De old fellow ain't forgot how to ride yet," said black Pomp, with a husky laugh, as he climbed into a sulky behind a restive horse, which Charley Lloyd was holding by the bridle.

It was an animal of a glossy black hue, highly groomed, yet to ordinary eyes, not very promising so far as speed was concerned. It certainly had not the build of a racer, its limbs being short and full, its body inclined to stoutness, while the whole conformation of the animal was unusually short for a track horse. Black Bess, for it was she, impressed you with a sense of heaviness and lack of activity, which was only negated by the fierce light in her eye, and a restless spirit which kept her in constant motion.

"Won't some chaps git sold when dey lay dar bets 'g'in' dis critter!" laughed old Pomp, as he took firm hold of the reins, and leaned forward in true jockey fashion. "Look yar, Pete. Jess you see how de ole man grabs de reins. Double yerself up a bit, but don't you be too hard on Bess's mouth, coz she won't stan' no such foolin'." And mind you don't tetch her. Ain't no sort o' use tryin' to put sperrit in her. She's got plenty. Jess chirrup when you want her to go, an' let up on de reins."

The host of the Blue Bell now released the restive animal, who sprang at once into a quick trot, darting along the straight lane at a speed which she had hardly promised.

"Yaw! yaw!" came back old Pomp's hoarse laugh, his heart warmed up to its ancient spirit, as he saw the noble creature, without an ounce of waste effort, darting along with a mighty stride, that rapidly consumed the ground beneath her.

Charley Lloyd looked on with approving eye. He had taken out his watch, and had his eye fixed on the dial plate.

"She is not down to her speed; but she ought to make a good mile at that pace," he remarked. "No one can tell what go there is in that creature till she is put side by side with some other fast traveler."

"Mought make it in 2:40 at that gait," answered Pete, with a critical air.

It was not long before the horse was seen returning, at a noble pace, while the gray-haired jockey gripped the reins firmly with both hands, an air of infinite satisfaction upon his face.

"She's jess a rattler!" cried Pomp, bringing her easily up. "Neber rid' hind a neater goer. What's her time?"

"Three minutes, to the notch," answered the landlord.

"Took a good half minute to stop and turn, up de lane," explained Pomp. "Didn't push de hoss, neider. She'll jess beat 2:20, sure as we're standin' yere."

Mr. Lloyd smiled, but said nothing. "Jump up into de sulky, now, Pete," cried Pomp. "You's got de ole man's zample to go by. Be mighty suah to 'bay orders. Gid de hoss her head, and if she don't fetch you out first chop, dar ain't no use talkin'."

There was a proud look on Pete's face as he climbed like a cat into the sulky, and grasped the reins.

"Sit well back," cautioned the landlord. "Have you got good foothold?"

"Solid as a rock," answered Pete.

"Keep her to the middle of the track. Watch her head well; I am a little afraid she may be tricky. Grip the reins with a death-grip, Pete."

"Ay, ay! Let go!" was the boy's impatient answer.

The landlord loosed his hold, stepped quickly back, and the impatient horse was off again like an arrow, with as much vim as if she had not already just made her mile.

"Sound bottom, anyhow," muttered the host, as he followed her critically.

No prouder little negro than Pete could have been found that day within the limits of Philadelphia. A whoop of delight burst from his lips as the swift creature got down to her work, darting along with an arrowy speed that made the landscape glide past like a shadow.

Black Bess stretched her neck well forward, her body sinking into a crouching attitude, her limbs thrown forward at every stride with a mighty reach. She seemed to enjoy the work quite as fully as did the whooping little hopeful behind her.

"Hi dar! Cl'ar de track!" Pete suddenly cried, as some horsemen appeared in the road before him. "Can't stop Black Bess, and dar's boun' to be a smash-up if you don't git."

The horsemen evidently thought so too. They drew out to one side of the way, and keenly watched the rocket-like steed which was rushing like the wind upon them. With a wild whoop Pete passed them, darting by like a flash.

"What do you think now?" asked Will Wildfire, who was one of the equestrians. "Isn't there go in Black Bess?"

"More than I thought from her build," answered Pierce Browning. "But she has some fast trotters to work against."

"She is going to be the winner of the Suffolk races," said Will, confidently. "What do you say, Charley?"

"I think she has it in her," answered Charley Lloyd, whom they had now joined.

The conversation was very soon interrupted by the return of Pete and his team. The boy had perfect command of the well-trained animal, drawing her up with ease out of a fast trot. He sprang lightly from the sulky, crying out:

"Dar ain't no use concoctin'. Black Bess is de belle of de ball, and eberybody else best git off de floor. Squar' away."

CHAPTER VIII. AT THE POOL ROOMS

A LARGE throng was gathered at Mace's, an excited crowd, who seemed to be each trying to outtalk all of the others. But where and what was Mace's? You must not ask any sporting character that question, if you do not want to be laughed at for your ignorance. It is the headquarters of the betting fraternity, and the center of that new mode of investing spare cash on the result of games and races, called pool-selling.

But a few days remained before the Suffolk Park races, an event of great importance to the sporting world, for some horses of great reputation were to be placed upon the track—no such rare goers as Goldsmith Maid, it is true, but some prime travelers.

"There's no use squirming," cried one individual, who occupied a chair in the rear of the room, "Lady Clare is booked as the winner. Why hang it all, have any of you ever seen her on her mettle?"

"I've seen her record," replied another; "2:20 is her best time."

"That with a hook! Just you back her against 2:18 if you want to make a stake. She led Rover two good lengths in her last race."

"She ought to be handicapped," said a third. "A walk-over is no race at all. The pools will be ten to one in her favor before the day of the race."

"What other horses are entered for the mile heats?" asked a curious bystander.

"Three other animals, of no record," was the contemptuous reply. "They are named Stonewall, Hardy, and Black Bess. The last is the only one that is known about here. They say it is a chance if she can come inside the 2:25 limit."

"What fool ever entered such a horse as that?" asked a tall person, of gigantic frame, who was leaning lazily against a window.

"Will Wildfire is the owner. You may know him. A royal good oarsman. But he knows nothing about horses."

"Him? Not much!" cried a young, foppishly-dressed individual, who was pushing through the crowd, flourishing a handful of bank notes. "Why, his horse has no more shape than a toad."

"Are you laying bets against her?" quietly asked the large speaker.

"Five to one, if there is a man here dares take me, and the top again flourished his handful of notes."

"I'll take that bet," was the reply.

"You?"

"Yes. One hundred to five. Or maybe you'd like to make it thousands?"

"Hundreds let it be. And we'll put the stakes in Mace's hands. I am going to rake in that hundred, my friend."

"All right. But I never go back on odds like that. A chap always has a chance you know."

There was a covert smile on Pierce Browning's face, for it was he. He evidently thought it highly probable that the enthusiastic young man would be taught a lesson before he got through with him.

Pierce lounged easily through the excited and loud-talking crowd, after putting up the money for this bet. The rattle of voices was almost deafening, a dozen broken sentences reaching the ear at once, so that no consecutive sense could be made of it.

"Lost his wheel turning—Lady Clare's pace—yes, trotting under the high bridge, when—deuce of a fine pacer—offered two to one and no takers—good jockey, but his hand—hasn't bottom for a five-mile heat."

And so on. Such was the hodge-podge conversation that assailed Pierce's ears as he made his slow way through the eager multitude.

"Hey, Ben!" he cried, as a familiar face met his view. "Have you seen Will? There's a prime opening to-day, if he wants to invest. I have laid over a thousand already, at good odds. I hope I am not going to be made a victim of misplaced confidence."

"There is no back-down in Will," replied Ben Huntly. "He is over yonder investing in pools. Hang him, he has so much confidence in that brute of his that I didn't escape the fever myself. I have laid some of my hard-earned cash on Black Bess."

They stood in a doorway, a little out of the throng.

"I saw her paces the other day," said Pierce, quietly. "She is a blazing good goer. And that mite of a blackbird who is booked to drive her handles the ribbons like an old stager. He is a regular little dare-devil. There will be a smash-up somewhere if any tricky bound tries to counter-march on him."

"But hadn't we best get Will out of this? He is growing too excited."

"Yes. Take him out for a row, Ben. Cool his blood on the Schuylkill."

"Me? I can't stir him. Try your hand; you can do what you please with him."

Pierce smiled, and followed Ben through the crowd. They soon came to where Will Wildfire was the center of a small knot of interested talkers, all gesticulating in warm excitement.

"Coax him out," said Ben. "But don't be too sudden about it. He's blamed touchy."

Another smile marked Pierce's handsome face, as he shouldered his way easily through the mass. His outstretched hand touched Will's arm.

"Come," he said, pointing outward with his thumb, and quietly withdrawing his extended arm.

Will looked quickly around, flushed a little at this curt summons, and then broke into a laugh.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he remarked. "We have our affair settled, and I seem to be wanted. Don't fail to be on hand."

Meanwhile Pierce had rejoined his friend, whose face was the image of astonishment.

"So that's what you call coaxing? A policeman could not be more delicate about it. And hang me if the boy ain't coming! But it must be to knock you down for your impudence."

Pierce looked quietly down at his massive figure, as if he thought it would take nothing less than a pile-driver to perform that interesting operation.

"What am I arrested for?" asked Will, walking up, with a quizzical look upon his face.

"For losing your head," replied Pierce. "I have no objection to your losing your money, so you do it like a philosopher. But I won't have you losing your head."

Will stared at his odd friend, and then broke out into a loud laugh.

"Well, you are not lacking in coolness, anyhow. How goes it, Ben? What's on the programme?"

"Pierce proposes a row up the Schuylkill—and say catfish and coffee at the Falls."

"I am agreeable. I believe I was getting a bit too hot. Will you go along, Pierce?"

"Yes—for the catfish and coffee."

In half an hour our trio of friends had reached the river road in Fairmount Park, with its long row of elegantly-built boat-houses, in brown and green stone, facing the river.

There is probably nowhere a more beautiful situation, or more tasteful appointments for boating purposes, than possessed by the Schuylkill Navy, with the rounded and thickly wooded slope of Lemon Hill to the left, the wide stream to the right, bordered by a broad green parterre on which the neat establishments of the boat clubs have been erected, while adjoining the foot of the hill runs the river road, always covered by its stream of handsome equipages.

In ten minutes more they were upon the river, Will and Ben at the oars and Pierce acting as coxswain.

"I think the stern of a boat just fits my figure," he said. "And it is so much more comfortable pulling the rudder than pulling a pair of oars."

And comfort is Pierce Browning's first principle," laughed Will, as he adjusted his oars.

"You've got it there," cried Pierce. "If you want to risk your money on a bet you'll find that a safer wager than the trotting capacity of the best horse that was ever foaled."

"Don't believe him," retorted Ben. "Look how he deceived all his friends by his astonishing performance at the steeple-chase."

"No deceit about it," stoutly affirmed Pierce. "I have two principles; comfort and cash. The deuce of it is, it is hard to get the comfort without the cash. I risked my bones on that dreadful occasion to rake in a few bets, that was all."

"Risked your bones?" cried Ben. "It strikes me that it was somebody else's bones; judging from the slight accident to Mark Preston."

Pierce laughed lazily.

"I hardly believe he will swerve his horse in a lady's track soon again—at least, when I and my elephant are by."

They had now got down to their oars, and were sending their long, slender boat swiftly up-stream, with the easy but effective pull of practical oarsmen.

It was a magnificent September afternoon, with the sunlight lying in great swaths in the stream, and gilding the rolling banks of the beautiful river.

There is no stream in the immediate neighborhood of a great city which nature has done more to adorn than the winding Schuylkill. And art has richly supplemented nature. For this river runs for several miles through the center of Fairmount Park, and the landscape gardener has been busy upon its banks, where he is slowly adding to the wildness of nature the adornments of art. It is yet but in process of transformation but already many beautiful vistas have been opened, and the rudeness of the native landscape softened and harmonized.

A genial influence descended upon the souls of our friends, as they swiftly made their way up the beautiful river. Its surface was dotted with boats, some crawling lazily along the banks, some—mere fragile shells—shooting along like arrows, others—eight and ten-oared barges—leaping under the clock-work stroke of their trained crews. Among these were mingled many awkward squads, who handled the oar with the most pertinacious crab-catching lack of skill. Add to these other boats with lady occupants, the bright colors of their attire contrasting brilliantly with the somber garb of their escorts, while songs, softened and sweetened by distance, came from their lips; and we have some idea of the enlivened scene.

Passing Columbia's bridge, reaching the racing course above Rockland, the boats thinned out, only a few of the trained oarsmen being here visible.

"It is a mighty odd business about those burglaries," remarked Ben, between the easy sweep of his oars.

"What is that? I have heard nothing of it," answered Will.

"I mean the mysterious burglaries that have been going on for a month now, leaving the police

entirely in the dark. The thieves, whoever they are, are mighty skillful. Not a trace of them can be found."

"I have read something about it," said Pierce, carelessly. "But as I belong to the blessed ones who have nothing to steal burglary don't interest me."

"We householders are not quite so comfortable," rejoined Ben. "They went through a house up Fifteenth street last week, and made a happy haul. For them, I mean, not for the poor victims."

"I hope they will keep clear of Wildflower Hall," remarked Will. "Is that the Falls village ahead?"

"Yes," said Pierce. "Bend to your ears, my jolly boys. I have fatigued myself enough in your service, pulling this heavy rudder right and left, while you have been enjoying yourselves at the oars. I claim my reward now in catfish and coffee."

It was not long afterward when they found themselves by the river wall of a hotel whose grounds extended to the stream. And, ere many minutes more a smoking dish of the appetizing viand for which the "Falls" are celebrated was on a garden table before them, flanked by steaming cups of fragrant coffee.

Catfish and coffee, under the shade of giant willows, and in the mild twilight of early autumn, with the low rippling of flowing waters and the soft breath of south-west winds as accompaniments, form a combination not to be despised. And our friends thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

"If we only had a few of the fair sex, to give tone to our feast, it would be divine," remarked Pierce, as he sipped the fragrant beverage. "There is nothing like ladies' eyes to give effect to twilight."

"And catfish," supplied Will, with a laugh. "But is it not time we were getting back? I have a journey before me, before I reach home."

"Oh! come with me," said Pierce. "I will find you shelter for the night, and an eye-opener in the morning."

The moon rode high in the heavens as they rowed back, down the shadowy reaches of the river.

CHAPTER IX.

A CONSULTATION AND A BURGULARY.

"MAY the fiends fly away with the brute that broke my arm!" cried Mark Preston, with a sudden outburst of anger. "There is blamed little sport in our game if a man has to waste his hours here, while the best bets are making."

He leaned back in an easy-chair, his broken arm in splints, a look of peevish discontent upon his face.

"Oh! you are doing very well," answered Luke, who stood looking out the window. "The doctor says you may go out to-morrow, if the weather is fine. You will be prime before race day."

"Wouldn't I like to scorch the chap that run me down?" exclaimed Mark, an evil look upon his face.

"Oh! that be dashed! It's all fair in war," rejoined Luke. "And you are just as well where you are, for the present."

"How is that?"

"Black Bess stock is down, that's all. You couldn't buck against it worth a cent. I am working the field through. The horse is a thunderer, there's no going back on that. And she is being trained into tip-top condition. I saw her yesterday, all muscle and action, not an ounce of fat; and she climbed over the track like a bird. They needn't talk about her shape. It's just as old Jake says; she's got win in her."

"Then maybe we'd best buck against Lady Clare, and hedge on Black Bess."

"No. The betting field is turning in her favor. I have been sowing seed at Mace's; and some sharp sports have been out looking at the beast's action. Just take me for it, but Black Bess stock will run like a race-stream before the week's out. You can back all the bets you want against her."

Mark sat in silence for a minute. Evidently his thoughts had taken another turn, for when he again spoke it was with a wide change of subject.

"Are you satisfied you can do it, Luke? I will be good for a thousand, the day you put it in my hands."

"Do what?" asked Luke, surprised.

"Strike those papers. She keeps them in the desk I told you of. Hang her!" and his voice took a savage tone. "I owe this arm to my effort to get even with her. And that's not all that I owe Clara Moreland. I have sworn to match her play with a better card."

"Oh! that's where the wind's blowing? I am going to win that thousand. And more, too, if things don't go wrong. I've done worse jobs inside a month, and it will be odd if I drop back in this."

"If you fail—"

"But I won't fail. I ain't that kind. The papers—"

"Hush!" warned Mark. "There's somebody at the door."

There was a peculiar fumbling, followed by an uncertain knock.

"Come in!" cried Luke.

"Come in's easy ter say. But how's a chap to do, 'd like ter know? Ain't I used out a-tryin'?" Like ter know where's yer latch?"

"Old Jake, for a thousand! And drunk as blazes," ejaculated Luke, as he flung open the door, revealing the form of the old sot, who surged with a staggering motion into the room.

"It's all correct!" hiccoughed Jake, as he flung himself heavily into a chair, and sprawled out his well-ventilated boots over the floor. "Jist had a snoozer down ter Charley Lloyd's. He's a prime feller. He's jist guns, Charley is."

"He didn't kick you out of doors to-day, then?"

"Like ter see 'im do't!" cried Jake, with an awkward squaring of his arms. "Like ter see the man in Darby, or in Kingsess, or in—"

"Why, hang it, Jake, he kicked you out yesterday," broke in Mark.

"Yisterdy be flazled! Let yisterdy take care 'f yisterdy; an' that's Scriptor. One day's nough to think on 'tunc."

"How about Black Bess?" asked Luke.

"Don't say nary word," whispered Jake, with a cunning look, and a ludicrous attempt to wink both eyes at once. "Mebbe Jake don't sleep in the hay-mow, an' mebbe he ain't got the run 'f the stable? Hush! nary word. It's all primed."

"Look out for old Pomp."

"What! That sassy nigger? Like ter see 'im say beans t' me. I slap his old jaw ef he said beans, d'yer hear that? Old Pomp! Pooh! Much I keer for him!"

Jake snapped his fingers in supreme contempt of this antagonist, of whom he stood secretly in intense awe.

"Where is Black Bess stalled?"

Jake held up his left hand with the fingers spread, and slowly counted over them with the right, the chair swaying beneath him like a ship at sea as he did so.

"One—two—four. No, bla' me, three. Le' me see. Sure that's three?"

"That's three."

"Well, s'long's you say so. Could 'a' sworn 'twas four. Three? Yes, reckon 'tis. Well, the boss—"

The sentence was not finished, for the rocking legs of the chair suddenly lost their balance, tipping its drunken occupant onto the floor.

Jake scrambled up in intense disgust, and stood looking down angrily upon the chair.

"If I thought 'twere did-a-purpose!" he ejaculated.

"Nice way to treat a gemman. A blazin' old cheer like that, that's got hinges in 'ts legs! Shoot yer double-jointed furniture, or any sich new-fangled 'ventions! Won't squat down on't 'g'in if yer gim me a cow."

"I hardly believe you would appreciate a cow," laughed Mark. "Cow's milk isn't your favorite beverage. But I'll tell you this, Jake. You've got to keep sober till after the race, or I'll serve you worse than Charley Lloyd does."

The old chap raised his bleared eyes with a look of offended dignity.

"S'pose a chap kin take a snoozer when he runs 'g'in an angel," he muttered, swaying unsteadily on his feet. "Don't know as anybody's 'toxicated here. Sure I ain't, anyhow."

"Hold your tongue, you mandlin old villain! Why the drink is oozing out of your finger-ends!" said Mark, severely. "See here now, once for all, our bargain's off if you let another drop pass your lips till after the race."

"Ain't drunk nothin' but buttermilk th' s'mornin'. Swar I ain't—ye-yes; had one snoozer; 'knowledge one snoozer. S'pose I kin take a topper-off? I'll swar off for one week if ye'll jist gimme the taste 'f old rye in my mouth."

"Give him a drink, Luke," answered Mark, with a grim smile. "And lock him up somewhere to sleep himself sober. I want to have a talk with him when he gets his senses back."

"Th' old man's kinder played out. Was up all night," muttered Jake, rubbing his sleeve across his mouth with a habitual motion. "Yes; don't keer, s'long's you say so."

He followed Luke from the room, his eyes lighting up in blissful anticipation of the promised whisky.

But leaving old Jake to his drink and his snooze, and the villains to their plots, we must step forward somewhat in time, and to another locality, to follow the actions of two others of our friends.

It was almost midnight. From the open doors of the Academy of Music a fashionable throng was rapidly emerging, the sheen of rich dresses and the flash of jewels glittering brilliantly under the clustering gaslights. The opera of Faust had just ended, and a crowded audience was rapidly making its way to carriages and cars, eager to get home to dreams of the divine music to which they had just listened.

One couple separated themselves from the throng, and walked rapidly up Fifteenth street to a noted confectionery establishment in that locality.

"We are ahead of the crowd. That is some comfort," said Will Wildfire, for it was he. "We will have a chance for our ice without a freeze in waiting for it. The night air is nipping. Had you not better draw your shawl closer?"

"Oh, no! I am not at all cold," replied Clara Moreland, his companion. "Who could be, after the music of Faust? Why, I feel warmed through and through by it."

"It certainly don't have that effect on me," laughed Will. "I think you need an ice. Let's trip along, for they are crowding on our track."

Clara's face was warm with joy and enthusiasm as they sat together in the restaurant, which speedily filled with people. It was not alone the music which thus animated her. The happy light in her eyes had a deeper source than this. And it was not without its reflection in Will's eyes, which he could not help but fix upon the charming face of his beautiful companion.

More than a half-hour had passed ere they left the table.

"I declare I did not know it was so late!" exclaimed Clara, looking at her watch after they had obtained a seat in a late car. "Why, it will be past one before we reach home."

"You can sleep the later in the morning," answered Will.

"Heigh-ho! I hope those burglars who have been so busy lately won't take the opportunity to rob

my house. My aunt is hard of hearing, you know; and they might carry off the rooms bodily without her knowing it."

"But your servant?"

"You could as easily waken up an oak log. There never was such a sleeper."

"Oh! well, it's lucky you didn't advertise all this. If the thieves only knew it they might pay you a visit."

Clara laughed, and began to hum an air from the opera. Evidently she was in no great dread.

It was, as she had said, past one o'clock when they reached the street in which she resided.

Will accompanied her to the door, which he opened for her with her latch-key.

"Will you not come in for a little while?" she asked. "You must be cold. You were not warmed up like me by the music, you remember."

"Cold? On a night like this? And with you for companion?" cried Will, gallantly. "I should be ashamed to acknowledge it."

Clara laughed, and slightly blushed.

"I did not imagine—" she began. She suddenly paused, holding up her hand attentively. "What is that?" she whispered.

Will listened a moment.

"Stand here," he quickly said. "I will see."

He dashed into the hall and back to the rear of the house, whence came the strange noises which had alarmed them. There was a light burning in the kitchen. The back door stood open. A quick, shuffling sound reached his ears.

Heedless of danger Will pushed forward, through the house and into the yard which lay in the rear. He was just in time to catch a glimpse of a form disappearing through the gate.

Ere he could reach the latter he heard the quick sound of wheels. A wagon was being driven out of the narrow alley which ran back of the row of houses.

"Stop thief!" yelled Will, dashing forward at the top of his speed.

The whip was plied on the horse, but he could not get to full speed in that narrow avenue, and Will caught up just as the team was turning into the wider street beyond.

A loud cry of alarm again came from the young man's lips. Catching the back part of the light wagon, an agile leap, in which his gymnastic training stood him in good stead, landed him in the vehicle.

At the same instant the driver sprang out in front, and ran quickly down the street, throwing the reins out of Will's reach. Heedless of danger the young man followed him. But the fugitive had too much start, and eluded him by darting through some shadowy courts.

Losing sight of him Will soon gave up the chase, and returned to the street where he had left the wagon. A policeman, warned by his cry, had just stopped the horse. It was a light-built, covered wagon, only suitable for conveying moderate loads.

In a few hurried words Will explained to the guardian of the peace what had occurred. And it needed but a moment's inspection to discover that the burglars had been busily at work, for the vehicle was half filled with articles of household utility.

Leading it back to the house they found the family all up, and in intense alarm. Clara presented a very white face as she cried to Will:

"They have broken into my desk, and stolen my most valuable papers! I would not lose them for this world!"

"They may be in the wagon," replied Will, entering upon an inspection of its contents.

There was silver ware, clothing, bed-linen, china, a mixed variety of articles—but no papers.

"They are not here," announced Will.

"Something must be done! They must be recovered!" she excitedly exclaimed.

"We have the horse and wagon," suggested the officer. "They may help us to trace the burglars."

CHAPTER X.

BLACK BESS AND HER KEEPERS.

OLD POMP was busily engaged rubbing down Black Bess. She had been out for her morning's exercise, and was warm and excited. The ancient jockey with his white hair, and the bend in his shoulders that arose from long leaning forward over the dashboard, was proud of his charge, a very evident satisfaction showing itself in his wrinkled and sable features.

"Hosses is hosses, I s'pose," he said. "But dat ain't sayin' as ebery boss is a trotter. Mought as well tell me dat ebery pig kin play eucher. A hoss like Black Bess ain't none of yer common folks of hoss-critters. Jess look at her eye now! An' what was dere eber such satin as dat skin!"

He rubbed his wrinkled hands as gently over her glossy hide as if he was fondling a lady's cheek, while a broken laugh came from his lips.

"Folks say de bets is layin' heavy 'g'in Black Bess. Lawsee won't dar be fun when she gits on de track! Bet dar's gwine to be some eyes opened. Don't tell me 'bout yer Lady Clares an' yer Rovers! I's seen de best steppers dat eber toed de track, an' I oughter know somefin 'bout hoss-flesh."

"You seen ole Jake round lately?" asked Pete, mysteriously, as he looked cautiously about him.

"Dat ole bloat! S'pose I bodder myself 'bout him? Nary much."

"I jess done tole you what he was arter," cried Pete indignantly. "An' you's forgotten it a'ready. Ain't be gwine to p'ison Black Bess, or put her out de race, somehow?"

"Are you sure of this, Pete?" asked Mr. Lloyd, who stood by. "If I thought it was really so I'd put Jake out of the race first, by breaking every bone in his ugly hide."

"Couldn't swar to it," answered Pete. "Hearn 'em talkin', but didn't catch de whole confab. But jess you b'lieve me. Don't trust ole Jake roun' whar dat hoss is."

"Tell me if you see him fooling about the stable, Pomp," said the landlord. "I am not much afraid of him, but it is better to be sure than sorry. By the way, Pete, they are making objections to your driving in the race."

"Dey are?" cried Pete indignantly. "Like ter know why. Bet none of 'em kin beat me handlin' de ribbons. Ain't druv hosses two years, an' them all racers fer nothin'."

"It's not that. The trouble is about your weight. It's no handicap race, and you are thirty pounds lighter than the other jockeys."

"Can't dey weight me?" asked Pete. "Let 'em put ten poun' in each boot, an' ten poun' more in my hat, if dey can't manage it no other way."

"We will try and get it fixed," replied Mr. Lloyd. "The lass trots well under you, and it is too late to get her used to another driver. They must take you."

"Jess say de word, an' I'll make my breakfast on cast iron an' my dinner on cobble-stones," asserted Pete. "I's boun' to ride dat race or bu'st."

While this conversation was taking place in the stable of the Blue Bell, a conference, bearing on the same subject, was going on in the smoking-room at Wildflower Hall.

Several of Will's most intimate friends were present, Pierce Browning, Ben Huntly, Harry Waters, and one or two others. They were seated around a table on which stood glasses and an open bottle of wine, flanked by a tray of cigars.

Pierce had taken his usual attitude, his chair tilted back at a dangerous angle, while light clouds of cigar smoke wreathed airily around his bushy head. The others had assumed various attitudes of ease, and the air of the room was hazy with the pungent vapor of the Indian weed.

"It is just as I said," remarked Ben, laughingly. "It is a catching fever. Pierce has taken it bad."

"All right," replied Pierce, easily. "I am not insured against it."

"Do you know," continued Ben, winking to the others, "he is wasting his substance on Black Bess? I don't know how many thousand he has laid on her now."

"I don't know myself," responded Pierce, following with his eye a wreath of smoke. "There it goes, up, up, up. Don't be trying to blow it down. Let a fellow be happy while he may."

"The lady is going to win that race," said Will, positively. "Why, bless you, boys, I've got her saddled with a large slice of my fortune. Do you fancy I will let her fall now?"

"I hear some talk about the little darky you have at the ribbons," remarked Harry Waters. "Is it quite safe, Will, to trust a boy like that with a racer? What can he know about horses?"

"He is a natural jockey," replied Will. "He takes to horses like a kitten to milk. And he has been in steady training at driving for two years now. You see, old Pomp has taken the boy in hand. He can drive the ugliest brute in Charley Lloyd's stables."

"And what Pomp don't know about horses isn't worth knowing," broke in Ben Huntly.

"But will they let him drive?" asked Harry. "He is under weight."

"That can be fixed," answered Will, easily. "But come, boys, you are not doing duty to the sherry. There stands the bottle as disconsolate as a lamb that has lost her mother."

"I don't hear it bleating," remarked Ben.

"You shall, then," said Will, tipping the bottle till the wine gurgled over into a glass. "It is too odd a brand to make much noise over it, yoh see. Come, Ben, wash that joke down or you will never appreciate it," and he forced the brimming glass into Ben's hand.

"Here, fellows," he continued, filling the glasses, "let us drink success to Black Bess. I know you will all respond to that toast. Here's to the lass that's booked to win the race!"

"Success to her heels, and to my bets," cried Pierce, as he swallowed the light wine at a mouthful. "Hang it, I could waste a river of sherry in the same cause."

"There's so much more of you than of common folks," remarked Harry, while Will quietly refilled Pierce's glass.

"Yes; that's a joke which it seems to me that I have heard somewhere before," retorted Pierce, as he balanced the light glass between finger and thumb. "It's light, like sherry. I can take them down together, and no danger of strangling."

"And you are heavy, like port," replied Harry, laughing.

"Go on," rejoined the giant, leaning back in his chair. "It amuses you, and it don't hurt me, as the man said, when he let his wife broomstick him."

"I say, Will," cried Ben, "how about that burglary? Has there been any clew found to the villains?"

"No. They have given us the slip."

"You captured their wagon, eh? And all the goods in it? I don't see that there is any loss, then; and you are a horse and wagon the winner."

"The papers have not the whole story," said Will, quietly. "Miss Moreland's private documents are missing. Some of them of great importance. The thief seems to have been some one who knew their value, and where to look for them."

"But that should give a clew to the burglars. Maybe her old friend, Mark Preston, is at the bottom of it. What are the police doing about it?"

"That is something of a secret," replied Will. "If it got abroad it would put the rogues on their guard."

"It will hardly get out from any one here," replied Harry. "We are all true grit, I fancy."

"Speak for yourself, Harry," retorted Pierce. "Hang me, if I ever like to trust myself too far! I don't know that I put myself out of the way to tell anybody's secrets; but they have a confounded sly way of creeping from me. Before I know I have said a word, the whole thing is adrift."

"I am not much afraid of you," laughed Will. "As for the police, they are trusting to the memory of the horse. They are driving him on all the roads that lead out of the city, with the notion that he will let them know when he gets near home."

"That's not bad," cried Ben. "Any sign yet?"

"No. They have tried him out at the Ridge, the Frankfort Pike, and some other roads, but they seem all strange to the animal."

"It will end like the sure clews of the police always end," rejoined Pierce, rising with a yawn. "Won't amount to a pinch of snuff, you will find that. Come, gentlemen, let's stretch our limbs a little. It is too fine to keep within doors."

They followed him out into the porch, where a soft south-west air was gently lifting the tendrils of the vines, and beyond which, on lofty arbors, a wealth of grapes hung purpling in the sun.

But let us return again to the stables of the "Bell." Pomp had been for some time through with his labors, and was resting on the porch of the hotel, retelling to Pete some of his old experience on the turf. In the stables Black Bess stood tranquilly in her stall, munching at her feed, while nearly a dozen horses, right and left of her, were engaged in the same pleasant occupation.

And everything was lovely about that locality, even to the pigeon that sat cooing on the roof of the shed, the chicken that stood on one leg on the horse-trough, fondly fancying it a fence-rail, and the lazy old veteran who leaned so supinely against the side of the stable.

A veteran he was, but not of human wars. His service had been performed against whisky, and he had been conquered much oftener than he had overcome his fiery antagonist.

But for once old Jake was sober. Sober for him, that is—as sober as a whisky-barrel can be when emptied of its contents, but with all its timbers thoroughly soaked in strong liquor.

"Too nice a day to stand out in the sun," muttered Jake to himself. "And sunlight never was good for my constitution. Guess I'll go inside."

But his movement toward the stable door was not his usual bold advance. It was more of a slow glide, broken by intervals of rest and of winking at the blinking hen. Evidently he wanted to give any chance observer the idea that he was utterly without an object in the world; and, as usual, took the very wrong means to do so.

The stable door was not locked. He opened it with lazy caution, and slipped in, pulling it to after him. Yet despite his care a slight noise was made in this evolution, causing Pete to lift his head. His vigilant ear had caught the sound from the direction of the stable.

Meanwhile Jake moved through the stable with much less show of lazy lack of purpose. He listened for a moment to the champing of the horses, to hear if any human sound mingled with it.

Then he walked straight to the stall of Black Bess, touching her gently with his hand. The intelligent animal moved uneasily, instinctively feeling that this was no accustomed touch.

"Woa, Bess! Woa, gal," said the intruder, stroking her sleek side. "Easy, easy, sweetheart. It's only old Jake. Don't stir, sweet. Got something nice for you."

He worked his way toward the horse's head, she still trampling uneasily. She looked around at him, with a gleam of savage light in her eyes. Evidently the creature suspected the presence of an enemy in this creeping figure beside her.

"Steady, steady," muttered Jake, soothingly. "Easy, gal. Don't know old Jake? You oughter know old Jake."

"I know old Jake," came a stern voice behind him. "You black-hearted old bloat, come out of there!"

A vigorous hand caught him at the same instant by the collar, and with one jerk landed him in the middle of the stable floor. In an instant the old fellow was drunk again to all appearance, his limbs growing limp, his voice maudlin.

"Reckon yain't done no harm. 'Y'needn't jerk a feller outer his boots," he ejaculated. "Yar's yer old boss. Jist coaxin' him up a bit 'cause he looked so lonely, kinder."

"Looked lonely, did he?" cried Charley Lloyd, still grasping the old chap's collar. "Bet I make you look lonely before I am done with you."

And he applied his boot to Jake's body with a vim and rapidity of action equal to old Tony Weller's exercise on the parson. At the same time he ran him headlong out of the stable, landing him, with one last kick, head-foremost in an odorous heap of manure.

"Lie there, you old bloat. And if I catch you in my stable again I will have you locked up for your pains."

A loud yaw! yaw! from old Pomp, and a shrill ya! ya! from Pete, accompanied this maneuver.

"Dat's ole Jake's rations," cried Pomp. "Ef he totes hisself back yare ag'in, see? I don't smash his head wid de pitchfork, sure's you live."

The discomfited conspirator picked himself up and limped painfully away, followed by the jeering laughs and gibes of Pomp and his pupil.

CHAPTER XI.

SPORT AND EARNEST.

"You may talk as you please, but Will Wildfire's horse is bound to carry off that race. I was out with

Joe Bundy to see her action. You know Joe? What other folks know about horses is what Joe has forgotten. Well, Joe says she's got win in her, and I'll back Joe's opinion with my money, any day."

"I wouldn't jump for the chance, if I were you," was the reply. "The horse ain't worth shucks. I've seen her going. Why, her figure is enough to condemn her."

The speaker was Mark Preston. His face was very pale. His broken arm, in splints, was hung in a tight sling, which left it no freedom of motion.

"Take my advice; don't bet on it," answered the first speaker.

"I'll go a thousand on it, with any man that dare bet me. And rake it in, too," cried Mark positively.

"I'll take that bet," replied the other. "But I warn you in advance that I have a sure thing of it. I don't want to rob you, Mark."

"Much you'll rob me," exclaimed Mark, excitedly. "Shall I book the bet?"

"Yes. If you are bound to get rid of your money, I might as well fall heir to it as any one else."

There was a hollow sound in the laugh with which Mark received this remark.

"When I find a tub winning in a race with a clipper, then I will take Black Bess stock; but not sooner," he asserted.

The bet booked, Mark moved on through the throng, shrinking from any contact with his injured arm, but eagerly listening to all comments on the coming race.

Since the date of our last visit to Mace's there had been a considerable change in public opinion. Black Bess's performances in training had become the talk of the town, and she was becoming the favorite. In the pools she had gradually reached par with Rover and Lady Clare, and now stood at a premium above all other competitors. In private bets odds were laying in her favor. It was now the afternoon before the day of the race, and the betting had grown quite heavy. A good deal of money was likely to change hands on the performances of the best time trotters. The matches between second-rate horses were neglected as the tide of feeling ran higher on the three brag racers.

Ben Huntly touched Will Wildfire on the arm, and motioned him to follow to a room out of the crowd.

"As sure as you live, Will, you were right. There is some devilry afoot," exclaimed Ben, as soon as they were out of ear-shot.

"Devilry? Where, how, and when?" asked Will, in surprise.

"About the race, I mean. I thought you were scared without cause, at first. But I will bet high, now, that there is bottom to it."

"What has happened, Ben?"

"Don't you see? Yonder is Mark Preston, looking like a ghost, and his arm hardly begun to heal. It is no trifle that has brought him out on the betting floor to lay odds against Black Bess. He is taking every bet that offers."

"Against Black Bess?"

"Yes. I heard him lay a thousand, even up, not ten minutes ago. There is something in the wind, Will. He knows what is in the horse, as well as you do. Take my word for it, he is not going to let her win if he can help it."

"I thought so," replied Will thoughtfully. "Had I better face him with it?"

"Face him, the devil, no! This isn't the place for a knock-down argument. But take my advice. Send word to Charley Lloyd to put a strict guard on the horse to-night. She will be poisoned, or sickened in some fashion, if they can get at her. By thunder, I'd shoot the villain that lifted a hand to hurt her."

"I don't know but you are right," said Will, still in deep thought. "It does no harm to look out for squalls."

"Write to Lloyd at once. Or send him word. Lend me your team and I will run out there myself. It will not do to risk a blunder now."

"Thank you, Ben. I would go myself, but I am otherwise engaged."

With Will Wildfire's usual habit of striking the iron while it was hot, this project was immediately put into execution. Ben drove off toward the Bell, while Will took a street car and proceeded up-town to the residence of Clara Moreland.

He found this young lady in the parlor, at the piano, singing, in a rich contralto voice, the charming, yet touching song of Heimweh.

Her voice lingered on the pathetic passages until her unseen listener felt his heart softened, and a suspicious moisture gathered in his eyes.

"Bravo!" he exclaimed, a little ashamed of this involuntary feeling. "Well done, sweet singer."

She turned hastily at this exclamation, and the loud hand-clapping with which Will accompanied it.

"Oh, it is you, at last!" she ejaculated, hastily rising. "Where have you been, you sinner, since—"

"Since Tuesday," supplied Will. "Why that is not quite a century ago. And you are making me sorry enough for it, bringing tears to my eyes with this lugubrious music."

"Don't slander it now, or I will send you away again," she cried, making as she would close his lips with her hand. "It is just charming, and I could sing it until—until—I cried like a child."

"And everybody else like babies," said Will.

"But that is not to the purpose. Is there anything further from the police? Have they discovered the lost trace?"

"No," was her reply, in a tone of disappointment. "And I put so much confidence in them, too. I felt so sure they would track the burglars."

"You unsophisticated girl," laughed Will, "to put confidence in the police. Why that is worse than crying over a song.—But what have they done?"

"They say they are sure—from circumstances—"

connected with the other burglaries—that these thieves have their lurking place somewhere just outside the city. But the horse has been driven on all the roads leading north and west, without showing any acquaintance with the country. They will next try the roads to the south. If they fail I hardly know what we will do. I fear my papers will not be recovered. And what in the world we are to do without them I cannot conceive. This loss leaves me in the power of Mark Preston again."

"Just take my word for it, he has those papers," asserted Will, positively. "I don't see just yet how to get at him, but we will find some way to prove him the thief."

"Could he be such a villain?"

"I fancy he could," asserted Will. "And worse, if it were necessary. I shrewdly suspect he is trying to injure Black Bess, to prevent her racing."

"Good heavens! you can't think so! What, a poor dumb beast, and such a noble creature, too? Why, I could not imagine any one evil enough to hurt Sellin. Only a brute could think of such a thing."

"He is equal to any brutality," rejoined Will. "But forewarned is forearmed. You will be ready for the race to-morrow?"

"I would not miss it for the world," she enthusiastically replied. "Black Bess is sure to win."

"It will be a close contest," he answered. "The horses are evenly matched. I am anything but sure of it, though I have bet heavily on my horse."

"Oh! you are not half a man! To desert your horse at the last hour! Let them distance her before you cry peccavi!"

Her eyes flashed and a flush of color came into her cheek. Will laughed at her excitement.

"I have one sound partisan, that is sure," he cried gayly. "But now for the question of the opera. Are you ready for Lohengrin to-night?"

"Oh! I know I should enjoy it!" she enthusiastically replied. "But—but I am afraid to leave the house. You remember the last time."

"Why, your house is as safe as a castle!" cried Will. "It is the very last place in the world they would think of returning to now."

"If I could only make my aunt think so. I fear she has a chronic fright."

"Let me at her," said Will. "I will cure her, if I have to talk her to the opera with us."

"I fear the cure will be worse than the disease," she merrily rejoined. "Do try some milder medicine first. Why, she would only hear one note in ten, and I would have to hum her the rest."

"You could give her a libretto to read. That takes the place of the music with half the audience," said Will, as he set out in search of the aunt.

Whatever line of persuasion he used, at all events he and Clara went to the opera, and alone.

It was past one o'clock that night that Will, with the music of Lohengrin still singing in his ears, took to his saddle for his five or six mile ride home. His late companion was already at her dreams, with the music of Lohengrin floating through her visions, when Will crossed the Schynkill at Market street, and rode briskly out into the night. It was thickly overcast, and became very gloomy when he had passed the close line of street lamps.

The road to Paschalville was long and uninviting at that hour of the night. Will put his horse to its paces as he rode out the lonely turnpike, with its sparsely-spread lamps, and its occasional long hills.

It was not far from two o'clock when he reached the neighborhood of the Bell, his horse's hoofs sounding loudly in the streets of the sleeping hamlet of Paschalville.

The thought of the threatened peril to Black Bess returned to him as he came within sight of the stables containing her.

"By Jove!" he said to himself. "I wonder if there is anything in it? It is too rascally still around here for anything. I don't like such confounded quiet. No doubt Ben put them on their guard, but it looks to me as if everybody was sleeping on his post."

He had checked his horse, and sat a moment in deep thought.

"There is no use in rousing up the house," he continued. "But I will try the stable door. I can, at any rate, see if it has been tampered with."

With Will the thought was the deed. In a moment he had sprung from his horse, thrown the bridle on the neck of the trusty animal, and was approaching the quiet-seeming stable. Reaching the door he gave it a slight pull. It resisted.

"That seems all right, anyhow," he muttered, pulling more strongly.

Something within yielded, and fell, with a loud noise. At the same instant the door flew wide open in Will's hand.

Simultaneously peculiar rushing sounds arose in the stable, followed immediately by the sharp report of a pistol.

Will released his grasp of the door, staggered a step or two back, and fell prostrate.

In a second afterward the rushing sound came to the stable door, and a form leaped headlong out, followed by another pistol-shot. The fugitive pitched forward at this shot, falling heavily to the earth.

At the same moment Will's horse, frightened by these two sharp reports, broke into a rapid gallop, his iron hoofs descending heavily upon the form of the prostrate fugitive, who lay just before him.

A loud groan broke upon the air of the night, echoed only by the dashing sound of the flying horse's tread as he rushed at full speed along the deserted road.

CHAPTER XII.

BLACK BESS IN DANGER.

We must go back a few hours to trace the events leading to this sudden catastrophe at the Bell sta-

bles. Ben Huntly had not failed to carry out his part of the programme, and had warned the proprietor of the Bell that extra vigilance was necessary.

"Heugh! don't you be a bit feared 'bout dat!" cried old Pomp, on learning that such fears were entertained. "Jess leab de ole dark' to settle 'em. You bet dey won't kick up no consequbulations 'bout yere. I's got my eye on Black Bess zackly like a possum gits his eye on a persimmon. You jess leab me 'lone. I's goin' to bunk in dat hoss's stall dis blessed night, and de chap dat comes fer Bess is got to climb ober Pomp. But I want to borry dat ole circumvol-ver of yourn."

"To borrow what?" asked the host, in surprise.

"Dat circumvol-ver. Dat shootin'-iron wid de six barrels. A reg'lar ole pepper-box it am; but I'm gwine to pepper some ob dem rascals if dey come foolin' roun' yere."

"Oh! you mean the revolver?"

"S'pose dat's what you call it. Dat ain't de name I gib it."

"But what do you know about handling a revolver? You may shoot yourself instead of the rascals."

"Not much," replied Pomp, indignantly. "Tain't dat kind of gunner I am."

"Very well, then, if you think you can trust yourself. Pink them well, Pomp, if anybody comes nosing around here."

"If I don't pepper 'em dar's no use talking," rejoined Pomp, positively.

And so midnight found the old negro with his cot spread along the foot of Black Bess's stall in such a position that no one could enter the stall without stepping over him.

It had been his fixed intention to lie awake all night, this being his idea of the duty of a sentinel. So laying the pistol carefully beside his cot, within easy reach of his hand, and stretching himself out at full length, he settled down to pleasant thoughts of the races he had ridden in the far past. Race after race came up before his mental vision. He seemed, indeed, to be riding them over again. He was starting at full tilt from the judge's stand, dashing helter-skelter over the course, and coming up to the winning-post like a whirlwind, while a burst of applause rent the air.

Yet, in reality, the only sound there was the old chap's snoring, for he was sleeping away like a top, and the race which he seemed to be riding was but a dream. It is so easy to make up your mind to remain wide awake, and so hard to do it.

But he was not as careful as he might have been, knowing that he slept very lightly, and that the least unusual noise would disturb him.

"Like to see a fly git ober me, an' in dat hoss's stall," he had remarked to himself. "Dunno as I wants to hurt anybody, but when dat circumvol-ver gins to shoot, jess luff 'em keep out de way, I ain't gwine to be 'sponsible fur its doin's."

Midnight came and passed, and silence reigned in the neighborhood of the Blue Bell.

It was more than an hour after midnight when a shadowy form came, with a slow pater of steps, over the bridge that spanned the adjoining creek.

The night was moonless and starless. Under its dark cope this indistinct figure silently drew near to the house, which appeared to be bathed in a sleep so profound that nothing could arouse it. It seemed like murder approaching its victim, so stealthy and deliberate was the creeping movement of the threatening shadow.

It stopped in the gloom of the hotel porch, and appeared to be intently listening. For several minutes this watchful vigil continued. Then, with a slight chuckle of satisfaction, the intruder turned and resumed his stealthy movement, toward the stable. Step by step he dragged himself forward, keeping diligently in the shadow, creeping under the gloom of sheds, and in the somber shade of walls.

The stable reached, he tried the door with infinite caution. It was locked.

"Jist as I s'posed," he muttered. "If it weren't locked I'd feel skeery. It'd look too much like a rat-trap. But tain't much I keer for their locks. Kin go through it like a mouse through a pound of cheese."

This speech was not pure bragging. He cautiously inserted a key in the lock, and, after a moment's manipulation, was gratified by a slight click. The key turned freely. The lock was open.

The sound passed through Pomp's dream like the crack of a whip, and set him off on a new train of dreaming. He was now driving a Conestoga wagon over the Alleghanies, and making his long whip-lash crack like a pistol over the huge and lumbering horses.

Inch by inch the door opened, until a crevice appeared wide enough to admit a human form. Then the intruder hesitated and listened. All was profoundly still. The quiet breathing of the sleeping horses was the only sound that came to his ears.

After a minute thus employed, he slipped through the opening, and drew the door cautiously to after him.

"Have to fix it some way," he mentally remarked, "so's it won't swing open. That moughtn't be healthy."

The stable was intensely dark. It seemed impossible that any one could make his way through it without some disturbance. But the intruder proved equal to the emergency. After confining the door in some way to hinder its readily opening, he produced from under his coat an instrument from which a narrow ray of light shot across the stable. It was that requisite to a burglar's outfit—a dark lantern.

The revealing ray was sent here and there through the darkness. Suddenly he closed the slide, with a feeling of apprehension.

"If it ain't that old nigger I'll be swizzled!" he mentally exclaimed. "And stretched right across the hoss's stall. I'll swear if the imperident black-bird oughtn't to be kicked right out. A feller kin never do a job of work for hisself without somebody mixing in."

A reassuring sound came from Pomp at this juncture—a long-drawn snore that was refreshing, if not musical, to the listener's ear.

"Oh! he's all right. Kin step over him as safe as if it was a hickory log layin' there."

Guiding himself by the light of a faint gleam from the lantern, he moved forward with a noiseless step. A few cautious minutes brought him opposite the sleeping sentinel, snoring on his post. The light, which he kept carefully away from Pomp's face, failed to reveal the weapon lying beside him.

With a long, slow step the intruder crossed the living barrier and stood safely on the edge of Black Bess's stall.

Ah! danger now indeed threatened the noble animal, which lay there in the stillness of sleep, all unconscious of an enemy. The shadow of the assassin was upon her. The gloom of midnight crime had invaded her sheltering home, to which her innocence and trust in man gave no power of protection.

Avoiding any disturbance of the sleeping animal, the intruder made his way forward in the wide stall, reaching its head without giving the slightest alarm to man or beast.

A moment's more listening, and he drew from some inner pocket a small vial, containing a minute quantity of liquid, which he poured into a water-bucket which lay under the horse trough. Then, drawing from the same pocket a somewhat larger bottle, containing a grayish powder, he emptied this over the oats which lay in the trough, mixing it up carefully with his hand.

It was with a slight chuckle of satisfaction that the villainous intruder clutched the empty bottles, and turned, with the same caution, to depart.

"Bet high that Black Bess won't win that race to-morrow," was his mental comment.

But circumstances over which he had no control were preparing, which would render his retreat a very different affair from his advance.

He had failed, in his preoccupation, to hear the steps of a horse in the street without. His first alarm came from a slight noise at the stable door, at which old Pomp's snore suddenly ceased.

The next instant a loud sound came from that direction, the door flying violently open, and the obstruction which he had placed in it falling with a crash to the floor.

In an instant the sleeping sentinel was wide awake. Without an effort to rise he grasped the pistol which lay almost under his hand, and fired a wild shot in the direction of the sound.—It was at this shot, as described in our last chapter, that Will Wildfire fell prostrate.

It had other effects than this. Every horse in the stable was awakened, and struggling to its feet. Black Bess, startled by the alarming sound, rose hastily from her recumbent attitude, striking the intruder with her iron heel in this quick movement.

The latter, who was seeking to escape, fell prostrate across the recumbent guard, knocking the pistol from his hand, while the dark lantern flew into an opposite stall.

Scrambling to his feet before Pomp could gather his wits sufficiently to seize him, he made a desperate dash for the stable door, with a halting step that showed he had received some injury from the animal's hoof.

"Whar's dat circumvol-ver?" queried Pomp, feeling hastily around him.

In another instant it came under his groping hand. Quickly lifting it he fired another wild shot toward the stable door. The succeeding circumstances we know—the fall of the fugitive, and his deep groan as the feet of the flying horse fell upon him.

The two pistol-shots coming thus suddenly upon the silent night did more than to arouse the sleeping horses. An instant stir was evident in the hotel, while heads were protruded from windows in the neighboring houses of the village.

"What's the matter?" cried the landlord, in a loud voice.

"Dat's easy axed, but tain't easy answered," replied Pomp, who had now made his way out of the stable. "Didn't shoot de ole circumvol-ver for nothin', jess you stake yer cash on dat. Yere's two on 'em fottedched. But de Lord only knows who dey is."

In a very few minutes more the inn was all alive. The doors were thrown open, and several figures emerged bearing lights. From the neighboring houses, also, forms appeared. The indication of a tragedy had suddenly aroused the sleeping population.

"I were layin' dar as wide awake as you eber see'd anybody," remarked Pomp, to his employer, "when I heered somebody at de stable-door. Den I snatched de old shootin'-iron an' let drive. Fottedched um, too, de fust shot. Jist arterwards anoder of em come runnin' froom de stable like mad. But Pomp was dar, you bet. Brung de circumvol-ver on him wid a squar' aim, and down he went. Dar's yer prevender. Can't fool dere time 'bout ole Pomp."

"Why, good God!" cried the landlord, in horror. "This is Will Wildfire!"

"Who dat?" screamed the negro. "Oh! lawsee! don't neber say dat! Jess as leave shoot my own picaminy. Can't be so. Marse Wildfire ain't a-gwine to hurt his own hoss. Tain't reasonable."

"This one is old Jake, the drunken old bloot," he announced one of the neighbors. "Poor devil, he has got his last rattons."

"Got a bullet froom him?" cried Pomp.

"Not he. His skull seems broken in. I heard a runaway horse. It must have brod on his head."

But the landlord was too busily occupied with the insensible form of Will Wildfire to attend to this conversation. He brought the light of his lamp to bear on the pallid face and closed eyes.

At the same moment a slight tremor shook Will's frame. His eyes opened and looked upward with an unmeaning glare. His lost senses were slowly returning.

CHAPTER XIII.

OLD JAKE'S POST MORTEM REVENGE.

"Where shall I put this horse, Mr. Lloyd?" queried one of the hostlers of the Bell.

He held the bridle of Will Wildfire's runaway horse, which had made its way back to the place in which it had left its master.

"I hardly think Mr. Wildfire will need it this morning," answered the landlord. "Put it in the stable, in any empty stall, and see that the poor brute has something to eat and drink. The animal cannot be justly punished for the murder which it chanced to commit last night."

"How is that?" asked a gentleman, who had just ridden up, and was on the point of dismounting. "There are all sorts of rumors afloat in the city. What has happened? They even go so far as to say that Will Wildfire was shot."

The speaker was Pierce Browning, who was in a state of excitement very unusual with him.

"He was shot at," replied the landlord. "At least old Pomp sent some pistol-balls flying wildly in the air, which, by good luck, did not kill any horses, and certainly did not hit any men. It is likely they may be found in the roof of the stable."

"But what is meant, then, by all this talk about men being killed?"

"There was one man killed—a drunken old rogue, who was trying to physic Will Wildfire's racer. But it was the horses themselves that took revenge on him. Black Bess seems to have kicked him while he was getting into her stall, and seriously injured his leg. He managed to run out of the door of the stable, and then fell in the road. At the same moment the horse you see here was frightened by the pistol-shots, and started on a full run. His hoof came on old Jake's head, and cracked his skull as if it had been an egg-shell. The brute creatures themselves have taken revenge on their foe."

"But Will Wildfire! how about him?" asked Pierce anxiously. "His life is worth a dozen of such midnight horse-doctors as this."

"He is enjoying a good breakfast, just now," replied Mr. Lloyd. "He was only stunned. All his trouble was that the stable door came open in his hands rather too suddenly. Will stumbled, and fell backward, striking his head on a stone. It was a cloudy night, but I think it likely that he saw stars about that time. He came to, though, after a few minutes, and is none the worse for his tumble."

"He is a rascally, ungrateful wretch, then," cried Pierce, sourly—though really much relieved, "to give all his friends such hopes of a sensation, and then to disappoint them in this ridiculous fashion. Where is he? I feel like telling him what I think of him."

"You will find him in the dining-room," replied the host, laughingly, "celebrating his recovery over an egg and a cup of coffee."

"Let him beware!" exclaimed Pierce, tragically, as he ascended the steps of the porch, and passed into the house.

Mr. Lloyd turned away, giving his attention to some other affair connected with his house, while an attendant led Pierce's horse to the stable.

The host of the Blue Bell had not been thus occupied many minutes when he was again interrupted.

This time it was Pete, Will Wildfire's ebony valet, who had been out exercising Black Bess.

"How dis, Marse Lloyd?" cried the boy, sputtering with indignation. "Dar some fool chap's gwine an put anoder hoss in Black Bess's stall. Now dat hoss 's got to git, 'cause I ain't gwine to stan' no sich nonsense."

"But it is Mr. Wildfire's own horse," exclaimed the host. "It is Frank, his roadster. You had better put Bess somewhere else for a little while, so long as that stupid hostler has taken up her stall. She will have to be driven over to the Park in an hour or two so it does not matter."

"Didn't notice 'twas Marse Will's own hoss, or I wouldn't keered so much," answered Pete, greatly mollified. "Ole Pomp's foolin' round Black Bess, anyhow, nussing her up fur de race; so I s'pose I might let de hoss alone."

And Pete walked away to inspect the nursing operations.

It was, perhaps, two hours afterward when Pierre and Will mounted their horses to ride over to Suffolk Park, where the races of the day were to begin in about an hour more.

It was a fine bright morning, with just enough snap in the air to make a brisk ride enjoyable. There had been a heavy dew during the night, and the dust was well laid. The two young men were in prime spirits as they rattled at a lively pace toward the race-course.

"Are you sure the old villain didn't physic her feed, in spite of you all?" asked Pierce.

"Hardly. Pomp swears that he was wide awake. He does acknowledge to a little muddiness of brain—just a floating cloud of sleep, you know. But he was wakened up by the wind of old Jake's stepping over him. For all that, however, I think it was very lucky that I happened into the game at that minute; for I've a notion that the darkey's brain was muddier than he lets on."

They had now reached the entrance of Suffolk Park. The place was already alive with people, and

the constant stream was flowing along the road leading to that locality sacred to horsemanship.

"What ails your horse?" asked Pierce. "Why, the brute is all in a white lather, and is foaming at the mouth."

"That is queer," replied Will, looking at the horse, which was evidently suffering. "I never saw him held that way before."

They were interrupted at this moment by Charley Lloyd, the host of the Bell, who rode briskly up, a look of anxiety upon his face.

"I'm half afraid the villain may have got the start of us," he cried. "Two empty bottles have just been found in the dust, at the spot where he fell. He may have clutched them in his hand. One of them has a very suspicious smell, and I have sent them over to Doctor Morgan to analyze. I doubt if he hasn't managed to poison Black Bess's feed, in spite of Pomp. But what ails your horse, Mr. Wildfire? He is white with sweat, and he is trembling like a leaf. Look out! He is going to fall!"

At this warning Will leaped lightly from the saddle and caught the wavering horse by the head. The poor brute seemed in deep distress, foaming, and heaving with the violence of its respirations.

"Lead him to the stable!" cried one of the authorities of the ground. "The horse is deadly sick. Here, Joe, take Mr. Wildfire's horse. See what is the matter, and try and doctor him up. What he doesn't know about physicking horses isn't worth knowing," he continued, as the person addressed led away the suffering animal, which could hardly stand.

"I don't see what this means," said Will, looking doubtfully after the horse.

"By thunder, I have it!" cried Mr. Lloyd, striking his knee sharply with his hand. "This horse has got the poison intended for Black Bess! It is a clear case of retribution; old Jake has revenged himself on the animal that killed him."

"But how is that? I do not understand."

"Your runaway horse wandered back to the Bell this morning. He was caught, and I told the hostler to put him in any empty stall in the stable. Now it happened that Bess was out exercising, and the fellow, by lucky stupidity, put him in her stall. Pete came to me, mad as fire, and growled dire vengeance against the fool who had ousted Bess from her quarters. Luckily I told him not to mind, but to put her somewhere else for the present."

"So ho!" cried the Suffolk Park proprietor. "That way the cat jumps, eh? They have been trying to poison Black Bess, and have hit the wrong horse. I'll be shot, if that ain't the luckiest blunder that I have heard of for a month of Sundays!"

"But may not the lass have nibbled at her feed early this morning?" asked Will, anxiously.

"No, Pomp threw some more feed into her trough after the disturbance last night. She could hardly have eaten down to the poisoned food."

"But look out that Pete don't lead her to her own stall when he finds it empty," suggested Pierce. "There may be enough of the physic left to put her out of the race."

"A good thought!" exclaimed the host of the Bell. "It will not do to take any such risks. I will ride back as quick as my horse can carry me and prevent any such fatal blunder."

Without another word he turned, and put his horse to a rapid gallop over the road leading to the Bell.

After some further conversation the two friends entered the enclosure, both congratulating themselves that this lucky accident had possibly saved them the large sums they had each invested in wagers.

The grounds were already well filled, the broad enclosure that bounded the track containing an excited multitude, whose eager members were actively engaged in canvassing the merits of the various horses entered for the day's races. The long files of seats fronting the judges' stand were fully occupied, as it lacked but ten minutes of the hour fixed for the first race of the day.

Suffolk Park is a mile track of an oval or egg shape, perfectly level, and with a firm, clean bottom which admirably adapts it to the display of fine horsemanship.

The attention of the throng of lookers-on was kept aroused by horses exercising around the track by the offers of enthusiastic betters, and by the various sources of amusement which such an occasion presents. There was certainly no lack of enjoyment or of excitement in the audience.

The first heat was a two-mile trot of horses with a 2:40 record. A half-dozen were entered, and there was a lively time as the mettled animals broke away from the starting stand, nose to nose, and with a lively "Go!" from the judge.

Shouts and yells rent the air as the animals came round again to the starting point at a rattling pace, but far removed from the evenness of their start. Two of them, indeed, were fairly out of the race, and of the other four, the foremost and hindmost were separated by three good lengths.

The drivers leaned forward in a doubled-up attitude, inciting their horses to speed by every possible means, their light vehicles bounding like feathers behind the flying animals.

As the end of the second mile approached the excitement redoubled. The horse which had been fourth in the first round was now seen to be putting out an unexpected reserve force, gaining ground step by step on his antagonists. As the last quarter was reached his head was seen to lap the wheels of the foremost sulky.

This position he stubbornly retained until within a hundred yards of the close, when a loosening of the reins, a light touch with the whip, and a cheerful chirrup from his driver, seemed to put new speed

into the animal. A quick, powerful burst, and he came up like a flash on the leading horse, who had no reserve force to spare. A shout that made the very floating clouds waver rent the air as he lapped this horse, and came in by a head and neck the winner.

Excitement, congratulations, not unmixed with groans over lost bets, followed this lively termination of the first match of the day.

But the interest in the victory was soon succeeded by a new and more entrancing subject of conversation. The events of the previous night, the death of old Jake, which had been well talked over, were followed by the news of the narrow escape of Black Bess from poisoning, and the lucky accident through which a much less valuable horse had taken her place.

This tidings flew like wildfire through the multitude, and was received with various expressions of concern and indignation. Had the instigators of the dastardly attempt been detected in the angry crowd at that instant, they would have run serious danger of lynching.

Yet they were there, unknown to those who were uttering anathemas against them. Two men stood apart in the center of the field, one with his arm in a sling, and a pallid face, while a look of baffled rage marked his features.

"We are sold!" he exclaimed, in a low, bitter tone, "and the old hound don't need paying. He has got his settler from the horses."

"A mighty good job, too," coolly remarked Luke Lister. "He is past peaching."

"But what is to be done? I have laid a big pile against this infernal horse, and I am devilishly afraid the creature is going to win."

"There is nothing left, as I see," returned Luke, "but to go for the nigger. I think we can salt the little hound in some way so that he won't be fit to drive."

"It is the last chance," said Mark. "Put your hounds on his track, Luke. Sicken him in some way, for heaven's sake."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HORSE DETECTIVE.

"NEVER see'd a hoss wid better style," declared Pomp, as he carefully manipulated the blooded racer. "She's jess in de primeest condition; ebery inch bone and muscle; an' bottom 'nuff fur a three mile burst. Don't you forgit de 'structious I s'g'n you, Pete."

"Nary time," answered Pete. "But ain't it time de matter was havin' her mash?"

"Don't know but maybe 'tis," rejoined Pomp, leading the animal into the stable. "S'pose we'll put her in her own stall now. De 'olliest enter don't like to be shifted 'bout no more dan a human pussion would."

"I do b'lieve she's been plinin' over it, dese two hours," asserted Pete.

The two ebony-hued jockeys, the old and the young, had led Bess into her stall, and Pete had just seized the bucket for the purpose of bringing her some water, when the host of the Bell rode up at a thundering pace, leaping from his horse and rushing headlong into the stable.

"For the Lord's sake don't put that horse there!" he yelled. "Has she eaten or drank anything in that stall?"

"Nary a mouthful," replied Pomp, turning around in great astonishment.

"Put her somewhere else, then. The feed there is poisoned. Drop that bucket, Pete. Likely that is poisoned, too."

If Pete had been stung by a wasp in the handle of the bucket he could not have dropped it more hastily. His eyes opened in astonishment till they seemed like two white goggles in an ebony frame.

"Great Jeremiah!" were the only words for which he could find utterance.

"Out with her at once, Pomp. Don't let her even smell at the trough."

Slightly recovering from the effect of this bewildering announcement Pomp hastily backed the horse from the stall as quickly as if he feared its very vicinity might prove perilous.

"Oh de Laud!" he ejaculated. "Dat old debil Jake. Felt kinder solemn 'bout him at fust, I 'clare; but de hosses knows what dey's 'bout. Dey's mighty 'telligent critters, 's hosses. Some men ain't no 'what 'longside 'em."

While this scene was occurring in the Bell stables, a couple of travelers were approaching that locality by the road leading from Philadelphia.

They drove a slow-jogging chestnut horse, their vehicle being a sort of goods wagon, light-built, yet capacious enough to stow away a considerable quantity of merchandise.

It was empty now, however, except for the two men who occupied the seat, letting the horse jog quietly on.

"I've heard of such a thing as a blind trail," said one of these, a sharp-looking, thin-faced person. "And I've a notion that's the sort of a track we are following. It's a cute game we've been playing, but it won't work. I say: suppose we combine business and pleasure? There's to be some fast racing on the Suffolk Park course to-day. Let's drive over and take it in."

"Hold!" replied the other, a large-built, black whiskered individual. "Look at the creature, now! Her ears are up. By Jupiter! she smells familiar ground, at last."

The lazy-looking animal was looking eagerly around. With a snort of satisfaction she broke into a quicker pace. The dull droop with which she had been dragging along, was replaced by an unlooked-for liveliness.

"Sure as you're alive, we've hit the mark!" ex-

claimed the first speaker. "Give her all the rein she wants, Jack. Give a rogue rope enough and he will hang himself, you know. But I've a notion this horse is more likely to hang her master than herself."

As they entered Paschalville the horse broke into a brisk trot. The driver loosened the reins to see what course she would now take. This was soon evident. She showed her training with the instinct of a doctor's or a milkman's horse, swerving from the road as she came opposite the Bell, and halting in front of the porch of this ancient hostelry.

"Her master has been in the habit of sampling Charley Lloyd's ale or whisky; that's sure enough," asserted the sharp-faced man. "Hello! within there! Hey! the man of the house!"

"What's broke loose?" asked the landlord, emerging from the stable. "Do you want to see me?"

"Yes. We're some old customers of yours, Charley. Don't you recognize our team?"

"I'll bet I do. And you along with it, now. Jack Brae, the thief-taker, eh? What lay are you on now, Jack?"

"Got a little business with the proprietor of this team, that's all," replied the black-whiskered traveler. "Who does it belong to?"

"A chap that hangs out somewhere on the road to Darby. I can't fix him exactly, for he's a new-comer about here. I've heard him called Phil Handy, but wouldn't like to swear that's his name. Won't you get out and take something, gentlemen? You won't be doing justice to your team if you don't, for Phil Handy, or whoever he is, always has a dry spot that can only be reached by a beaker of ale."

"Well, we don't want to disgrace the horse that hauls us," returned Jack, leaping to the ground.

"He will go better if he honor his judgment by imbibing. What sort of a got-up chap is this Phil Handy?"

"Born in England, I'll go high on that. You can see it in his face, and hear it on his tongue. He is a tall, raw-boned customer, with side whiskers, sort of sandy color. A long nose, blue eyes, and something of the look of a decayed sport. What is yours, sir?"

"Oh! I'll follow our friend Jack's example. His taste in drink is proverbial," and the sharp-eyed traveler took up the bottle from which Jack had just poured a generous portion.

"Across the bridge, did you say?" asked Jack, as they again entered the wagon, after wetting their whistles at the Bell bar.

"Yes, and straight out the Pike. Give the horse her head. She'll be a queer one if she don't know her own home. What's up, gentlemen? Some thieving, eh?"

"Why, it looks that way. If we are on the right lay you will soon hear of some fun. Who is going to win on the track to-day?"

"The fellow that beats," replied the landlord. "That's about as good an answer as you gave to my question."

Jack laughed, as he started his horse.

"On secret service, you know," he cried out. "Will see you at the Suffolk if we get through in time. Good-day."

"And good luck," called the landlord after them cheerily.

About a half-mile beyond the Bell they struck the foot of the slope at whose summit stood Luke Lister's habitation. The horse showed no signs of slacking speed at this acclivity, but dashed up the hill with a briskness that was very promising.

"It is getting warm, as they say in the game of 'hunt the slipper,'" cried Jack. "Our Rosinante is not far from home, or I'm much mistaken."

His suggestion proved correct. Arrived at the hill top, the horse ran past the modest mansion which crowned the slope, but stopped in front of the gate leading to an equally modest stable in its rear.

"Struck it, by thunder!" asserted Jack. "Jump down and open the gate. We will soon see if a horse remembers his own out-bin."

His companion did as requested, the horse turning into the gate as soon as it was opened, and making her way, with a loud neigh of recognition, to the stable.

Jack jumped briskly from the vehicle, throwing the reins on her back.

"Loosen her gears and take her out of the shafts," he said. "She deserves a nibble of grass for her honesty. So this is the burglars' den, eh? By Jove, it looks as innocent as a lamb's cote or a dove's nest. And hasn't as much signs of life as a dead mackerel. But looks go for nothing in our trade. We've got to make our approaches gently."

The horse was by this time released, and was busily cropping the long grass of the garden. The two men cautiously approached the house, whose open shutters gave signs of habitation, but about which no life appeared.

But we must leave them for the present, as affairs at Suffolk Park demand our attention. A second race has been run since our last appearance there, and knots of eager sportsmen are busily talking over the features of the races already accomplished, and canvassing the merits of those yet to come.

Pierce Browning is the center of such a group, to whom he is retailing opinions in his usual quiet, devil may care way, though some seem to look upon him as an oracle.

Mark Preston is there, too, with his pale face and his injured arm. There is a deep bitterness in the scowling look which he fastens on Will Wildfire, who has just passed him, regardless of his presence.

But Will has another object in view, of more importance to him than the looks of his revengeful foe. He has just caught a glimpse of a fair face, among those entering at the gate, and pushes quickly forward.

"Better late than never is a good old saying," he cried, on reaching this lady, "though I had almost given you up."

"But the race is not run yet?" she anxiously inquired. "I would not miss that for anything. But is it not the hour yet?"

"No. You have an hour's grace; and another trot to amuse you in the meantime. Come this way. I have reserved a seat for you."

The bright face of Clara Moreland looked beautiful among all the beautiful women there assembled, as she followed Will in his eager movement. Many eyes surveyed them admiringly, for youth and beauty are always admirable, and Will and Clara possessed both in their richest prime.

Among the eyes fixed on them were those set in the ebony face of old Pomp, who was surrounded by a knot of jockeys, to whom the old fellows opinion was almost oracular.

"Hi!" he exclaimed, shaking his woolly head in delight. "Dar's Marso Will an' his lady. She's got a face jess like an apple blossom; an' eyes—golly! I ain't got anoder word to say, only if he's gwine to make a catch dat's de kind he's got up fur. Neber had these ole eyes on sich a lubly pair before."

Not far distant from Pomp's post of honor was another friend of ours, no less important a personage then Pete, the prospective driver of Black Bess. He was talking with a smooth-tongued, ministerial-looking person.

"Wrong to drive a horse! Wonder what you've been brung up!" exclaimed Pete, with astonishment. "Spec you's neber been eddicated in hoss business much. Why, see yere, ain't it nat'ral for a hoss to run?"

"Certainly, that is natural."

"Well, den, it's jess as nat'ral fur a little nigger to hang on. If de hoss drags him roun' de track dat aren't his fault, nohow."

And Pete laughed heartily, as if he thought he had the best of the argument.

"Can you read?" asked the other, solemnly.

"Wouldn't brag much 'bout eddication if I couldn't," asserted Pete.

Then I have a small tract here which I hope you will carefully peruse. It is entitled 'The Sin of Gambling.' You will learn some wholesome truths from it."

He drew the tract in question from his pocket, in company with a handful of peanuts.

"Golly! dat's de kind of track dis nig lub best!" exclaimed Pete, looking longingly at the nuts.

"These? Well, I will present you with these if you will only promise to read the tract."

"Pass it ober," said Pete. "Guess I'll masticate it: arter I's done with de peanuts. Talk 'bout yer ice cream an' sich truck! Dey ain't a patch 'long-side of peanuts."

A few minutes afterward Pete strolled away from his new acquaintance, eagerly munching at his provender.

"Sold!" cried the tract-distributor, surveying the boy with an evil look.

"Dunno 'bout dese yere nuts," remarked Pete.

"Dey ain't fust crop, nohow. Ouch! dat chap's bitter as gall. Wonder if the track he gub me is as hard to swallow."

CHAPTER XV.

THE RACE.

A BREEZE of excitement ran through the assembled multitude. The great race of the day was about to come off, the mile trot between horses with a 2:25 record, for which there were five entries, Lady Clare, Rover, Black Bess, Stonewall and Hardy.

Little was known about the two last-named horses and the betting had been heaviest on the others. Lady Clare had made magnificent time in former races, and her stock went up rapidly as the curious crowd gathered around the stables, where the racers were being led out and harnessed for the trot.

"Isn't she a beauty?" "Straight and trim as an arrow." "Look at her counter, she's just magnificent." "Rather light, I fancy." "Don't you believe that. She'll carry her weight."

Such were a few of the many admiring comments with which the beautifully-built and splendidly-groomed animal was greeted.

"Which horse is the large bay?"

"That is Rover."

"Well, that is what I call a horse. There's bottom in that creature. He is no pretty plaything like Lady Clare."

"Pretty plaything, eh? Just wait till you see her on the track."

"I don't like that fellow with the heavy fetlocks. There's too much weight without muscle to carry it. What horse is it?"

"Hardy."

"But where is the mare that they tried to poison? A rascally business that was. I hope she'll win."

The feeling he expressed was shared by many others. There is nothing like a story and a mystery to arouse human interest, and Black Bess was the hero of the day to all who had heard of her lucky escape from poisoning.

When she was led from the stable a movement of the crowd and a rapid buzz of conversation attested the general interest. They crowded in upon the space set apart for the horses, many busy comments being made on her appearance. These opinions were not all favorable.

"She has no build," declared one critic. "The creature is too dumpy. And I'll swear she don't know how to carry her head."

"She hasn't the points of a born racer, that's flat. I doubt if she's a thoroughbred."

"But look at her limbs. There's carry in them, if she only has a good reach."

"An ungainly brute, I call the horse," said another adverse critic, turning away in disgust.

"Don't take too much stock in any such notions," replied another, who had been attentively examining the object of the conversation. "Look at the creature's eye. She says there 'I won't be beat' as plain as if she could talk. And she steps as proudly as a queen. I never saw a tread I liked better. Take my word for it, the horse is not going to be discounted easily."

"Who drives her? Jim Mace?"

"No. The little blacky you see there. That sharp-looking young rascal."

"He? Why he is not over fifteen years old; and full thirty pounds under weight."

"But they say he can handle the ribbons as neatly as any man on the ground. He has been under old Pomp's training; Charley Lloyd's right hand man, you know. There's no better trainer in the States. That's him at the horse's head now."

"But about the weight?"

"That's looked after. The sulky is weighted, I believe."

During this conversation the horses were being carefully harnessed, the noble animals being as tenderly handled as though they were made of fine French china, and would break with very rough handling.

Black Bess was the most nervous and uneasy of the lot, stamping and restlessly stirring, while her eye gleamed with an almost savage fire.

"That boy will never hold her. She wants a stronger hand."

"Plenty of fire there, that's certain. But Pete's a fiery young hound, himself."

"What luck?" asked Luke Lister of the ministerial-looking individual who had been conversing with Pete.

"He bit," was the reply. "I tried the parson dodge on him. Gave him a tract on 'The Sin of Gambling,' and a handful of loaded peanuts. The young devil didn't take to the tract worth a cent, but he went for the peanuts as if he'd been through a six weeks' fast. If his stomach ain't made of cast iron he'll tumble out of the sulky before he's half round the track."

"Good. We've bucked against Black Bess too strong to afford to have her win the race. I've got a cool thousand on her; and I wouldn't like to say how much Mark has up."

"She won't win it, if there's any virtue in drugs."

"Hush! We may be overheard."

The two confederates walked away to another part of the field.

"Clear the track!" came the order from the judges.

The horses which were exercising on the track were hurried off, leaving a clear field for the racers, which soon appeared, moving gallantly up, and taking their places at the start.

"Which horse has won the pole?" asked Clara Moreland eagerly, as Will returned to her, after a short absence.

"Rover: with Black Bess second, and Lady Clare third. Here they come now. A splendid show."

"What horse is the chestnut, that tall, hard-mouthed brute?"

"Stonewall."

"He is a well-built horse.—Ah! the little beauty! Is that Lady Clare?"

"Yes."

"She might pass for an Arabian. I am half in love with her.—Black Bess is ungainly beside her."

"Yes," replied Will, slightly nettled. "But beauty is one thing, and duty is another."

"Now you are vexed.—I knew you would be if I dared praise any horse but yours. We'll wait till they come up to the winning post before we finish our fight.—Look at little Pete! If he ain't too comical for anything."

Others thought so too, for a laugh arose at the preternaturally solemn aspect of the darkey, unrelieved by a glimmer of his usual jollity.

He looked important, though, as he grasped the reins with a death-grip, forcing the restive animal down to a slow trot.

Pomp bustled up, with a pretense of adjusting some part of the harness.

"Don't you forget my 'structions," he whispered to Pete.

"Nary forget," was Pete's sententious answer, as he guided his horse into the line.

A moment more and the five animals, side by side, came up at a full dash to the judge's stand.

All eyes were alert, every heart stopped beating for an instant, every form was bent forward in eager interest—but the sharp clang of the bell announced that a fair start had not been made. Stonewall, taking the bit in his teeth, was a half-length in advance of the other animals.

The racers had dashed full twenty-five yards ahead before they could be stopped and returned to the starting point.

Twice more a false start was made. The first time it was Hardy, the next Rover, that broke the uniformity of the line.

"Are they never going to start?" asked Clara, impatiently. "Here they come again!—Look at Pete! I do believe the little rogue is holding in his horse!"

"It looks that way," said Will, frowning. "She will never go with a tight rein like that."

Yet there were no signs of intention in Pete's face; he was solemn as a young monkey as he brought his horse up to the judge's stand, a head and neck behind the others. The ominous bell again rung out. It was another false start.

"What does the villain mean?" queried Will. "Is that some of Pomp's 'structions? I have a shrewd notion he did that purposely."

"It looks like it," returned Clara, shaking her head. "It's beginning to tell, to. Lady Clare is be-

coming heated and nervous. But Bess seems to grow more quiet with every start."

"That's the advantage of bottom," whispered Will. "She has the stuff in her to wear them all out at that game. But I don't like it. I want the thing done fairly, and I'd kick Pete if I had hold of him."

"What ails him?" cried Clara, quickly. "Look at his face! There is something wrong with him. I would say he was growing pale if charcoal could grow pale."

Will anxiously looked at the boy, who was driving past on his return to the starting point. Plainly enough all was not well with him. Something was amiss in his interior.

"I hope he is not going to become sick at this critical point," said Will, in a tone of great anxiety.

Whatever was the matter with the boy he evidently felt that there was no time to waste in getting the race through as soon as possible. There was no return to his former tactics. The five horses came up, this time, neck to neck. A blanket would have covered them all, so closely were they laid side by side. Their action was simply splendid.

The experienced eye of the judge cast one keen glance across the exact line of the horses.

"Go!" came in loud command from his lips.

And go they did, darting like a whirlwind down the smooth track. For a hundred yards they kept side by side, scarcely an inch's breadth separating the line of their noses. Then training and blood began to tell.

Hardy made a bad break and went to the rear. Rover forged ahead, gaining a half length the advantage. Lady Clare and Black Bess yet kept side by side, while Stonewall gradually fell behind.

But soon the Lady Clare blood began to show itself. She stepped out with a quick burst, lapping on Rover, and leaving Black Bess a half length in the rear.

The excitement of the lookers-on was now growing intense. A thousand exclamations rent the air. Shouts of "Go! Go!" greeted each horse that gained a temporary advantage. A hundred hats were flung into the air as Lady Clare made this decided burst.

Bess had not yet deviated from the regular pace with which she set out. Pete grasped the reins closely, while a preternatural solemnity marked his face.

They were now nearing the half-mile turn, when the driver of Lady Clare, who had forged more than a length ahead of Bess, showed signs of an intention to turn short and take the inside track.

"Hi! thar! don't try dat!" yelled Pete. "Dar'll be somefn' bu'st, sure's you lib. Back water dar!"

As the opposing jockey still tried to crowd in, Pete gave Bess the rein, with a quick chirrup at which she darted ahead like a bird.

"Look out there, or your wheel's gone!" came a warning cry.

Lady Clare's driver took the hint, and swerved out again, but not in time to keep Pete from sweeping his wheels. A sharp crack followed. Three fellows were torn from the wheel of the fouling sulky.

A laugh of disdain came from Pete, as Bess came grandly up side by side with her antagonist, and but a neck behind Rover, who was hugging the inside turn closely.

The other two horses were a length or two behind, and showed little hope of making up their losses.

A moment more and they were all dashing briskly down the home stretch, the three leading horses keeping their relative position until the third quarter had been made.

Then, whatever it was that ailed Pete, he suddenly became doubled up like a knife, still clinging to the reins, yet apparently holding his seat with difficulty.

"What is the matter?" was the universal cry. "Is the boy sick?"

"It is working," said Mark Preston, with a sinister smile. "He will be on the ground before he makes a hundred paces more. The game's lost for Black Bess."

But he didn't know Pete. In a moment more he had straightened himself up again, though evidently in severe pain. Lady Clare and Rover were both now leading, the former by a half length, the latter by a head.

Pete shook the reins and gave his cheerful chirrup. The intelligent animal, with a strength that seemed as fresh as at the start, darted onward, her long, swinging stride telling immensely, while she sunk down into that crouching attitude habitual to her when at top speed.

In a second she was neck and neck with Rover. In five seconds more she had broken down the advantage of Lady Clare. The two horses trotted side by side, at a tremendous pace, which was plainly telling on the slighter-built animal. Scarce a hundred yards separated them from the close.

The shouts and cries of "Go! Go!" which rent the air, were broken at this instant by a general exclamation of alarm and surprise. Pete was again doubled up like a jack-knife, the reins had fallen from his hands, and he was swaying in his narrow seat like a leaf in the blast.

"Great Heaven! what is wrong with the lad?" came from more than one voice. "And he had the race in his hands."

But they did not know Black Bess if they thought she was not able to take care of herself in such a crisis. If Pete could only retain his seat for five seconds more!

The brave boy was evidently trying hard to do so, while the noble horse shot forward in one supreme effort.

A shout that rent the sky broke forth as she darted past the judge's stand a full half length ahead of Lady Clare, winning the race.

But the shout was changed to a cry of fear and

alarm as the next instant Pete pitched forward and was flung heavily from his seat, striking the ground with a sickening thud.

It was with difficulty that Rover was swerved aside, and prevented from running over the fallen victor.

CHAPTER XVI.

JACK BRACE MAKES A DISCOVERY.

"SPEAK louder. I'm a bit hard of hearing," said the ill-favored woman, who came to the door in response to Jack Brace's loud rap.

"Is Phil Handy at home?" screamed Jack, at the top of his voice.

"You needn't holler. I ain't so bad as that," the woman sharply answered. "There's nobody at home 'cept me."

"How soon will he be home?"

"I dunno. He's gone to the races. Not much afore night, I s'pose."

She made as if she would shut the door in their faces.

"We are in no hurry. We will wait till he comes," screamed Jack, setting his foot against the door.

"Tain't no use, I tell you," cried the woman, pushing hard on the door. "I'm a lone woman here, and I won't have no men waiting about till Lu—Phil, I mean, comes home."

Jack made no reply, but, setting his burly shoulders to the door, flung it wide open, pushing the struggling woman back to the wall.

This high-handed proceeding roused the good lady into a burst of fury, and she opened on the intruders with a fierce vituperation that would have done credit to a fishwife.

But Jack marched in, followed by his companion, with as much indifference as though it had been but a fly buzzing at his ears.

"You owdacious villains!" she screamed. "If my man was only here wouldn't he pay you out for this? Taking advantage of a weak, lone woman! Oh! if I only had my broom-stick I'd trounce the ugly pair of you! Pretty carryings-on indeed, for a pair of burglars to break in on a defenseless female!"

"We are not burglars, my good woman."

"Your good woman! Your good woman, indeed! I'd have you know, you monkey-faced villain, that I'm nobody's good woman! And I'll have the law of you, too. We'll see if you're not burglars. What are you, I'd like to know?"

"Policemen, madam," said Jack, marching on.

A scream came from the woman's lips. She flung herself on the door of the room which Jack was about to enter. It opened under her weight, and she tripped and staggered in 'o the room, falling into a chair on its opposite side.

"That's all right," Jack coolly remarked. "Take care of the virago, Frank. Use the darbies if she is obstreperous. I will take a survey of this interesting mansion."

Frank slipped into the room before she could recover from her involuntary movement, turned the key in the lock, and stood with his back to the door.

"Now you'll please keep cool, my dear woman," he quietly remarked. "My partner and I mean business, and the easier you take it the better you'll feel after it's all over."

"You mean business, do you? Locking yourself up alone with me, you ugly, broken-nosed, bearded, foul-mouthed, owdacious burglar! I'd have you know I mean business, too."

Before Frank could hinder her, she had flung open the bowed shutters of a window, and leaped through it with a strength and agility for which no one would have given her credit.

Meanwhile Jack had hastily sought the upper stories of the house, and was rapidly opening room after room, taking in their features with one comprehensive glance of his experienced eyes.

"Hal! this looks promising!" he exclaimed, as he tried the door of a room on the third floor, opposite that in which Pete had been imprisoned.

It was locked.

But this was little hindrance to the experienced detective. He was well provided with keys and thoroughly versed in the mysteries of locks, and not two minutes elapsed before the door stood open, revealing the secrets of the closed room.

"Looks like a pawnbroker's office on auction-day," he muttered, surveying a miscellaneous accumulation of materials of every sort, with which the apartment was well filled. "A neat assortment indeed! If we haven't struck oil, then I'll sell out. Never saw a better supplied burglar's store-house in all my life."

Any more minute examination of the treasure he had discovered was prevented by a sudden and violent uproar below. Wild cries in a woman's voice, the sound of blows, tramping of feet, and a mixture of yells and oaths in a man's tones, were enough to startle the steadiest nerves.

Hastily closing the door, Jack ran rapidly downstairs, to witness a spectacle, which he was, for a time, prevented from taking part in by an involuntary fit of laughter.

For the good lady of the house, grasping a heavy broom as a weapon of offense, was actively belaboring his comrade, who was corralled in a corner, and crouching down in a vain effort to escape the incessant shower of blows.

"You mean business, do you, you house-breaking villain! You mean business, eh? Maybe I don't mean business, too!"

And every word was emphasized with a blow which made it very evident to the victim that she certainly did mean business.

Jack stood for a minute tightly grasping the balusters to keep himself from falling, for he was quite overcome with laughter. As soon as he could recover he ran down to the rescue of his comrade.

But the latter, at the same instant, darted in a crouching attitude from his corner, taking his assailant in the knees, and upsetting her, broom and all, on the floor, while he crawled hastily out and hurried away from that dangerous vicinity.

When the lady of the house had made her agile escape through the window, it was with an intention of flight, as her guard supposed. He did not follow her through the window, but unlocked the room door, and ran out into the passage, making his way toward the rear exit from the house.

But he calculated somewhat wrongly, for, as he opened the kitchen door, he found himself half-blinded by the descent of a broom in the strong hands of the virago. Retreat was of little avail. She had the whip hand and was bound to keep it, using her weapon with such rapidity and vigor that in a minute she had her antagonist fairly cornered and at her mercy. Such was the situation of affairs when Jack came upon the scene, just in time to witness the comical denouement to the affray.

Taking advantage of the fact that the lady was, for the moment, *hors-de-combat*, Jack ran forward, and quickly slipped a pair of handcuffs over her disarmed hands.

"Business, ma'am," he said, apologetically. "You'll be wanted, you know; you and your pals. So you'll excuse the little liberty which I am taking with you. You can come back, Frank," he cried, to his cowed comrade, "the dragon is muzzled."

"The devil take her, for a she-tiger!" cried Frank, wiping off the blood which flowed from more than one deep scratch on his face. "Shoot me if I wouldn't sooner have a baker's dozen of Kilkenny cats clawing at me. I'll give in, Jack, I've met my match for once in a woman."

"Let me at him again, the baby-faced catamount!" screamed the woman, striving to struggle to her feet, while Frank started back in involuntary alarm.

But we must return to the race-course, where Pete had just tumbled to the ground, after bringing his horse safely in as winner of the race.

The uproar was indescribable. Fifty men in an instant broke into the track, some with a wild intention of stopping the unchecked horse, some to lift up the fallen driver. With the hoarse shouts of men were mingled the screams of women, it being feared by all that the boy must have been killed by his fall.

"Great Heaven, Will!" cried Clara, with a scared face, "is he—"

But Will was gone. With little heed to who sat before him, he tumbled headlong down the line of benches, crushing more than one hat, and injuring more than one bonnet in his rapid descent, and bounding at last into the arena among the first of those who had succeeded in entering.

Clasping the insensible boy in his arms he ran hastily with him toward the judge's stand, where some cushions were quickly arranged to lay him upon.

"Is he hurt? Is he bleeding?" came from more than one anxious spectator.

"Only stunned, I think," said Will. "There is no blood. He seemed to strike on his head. I hope it has not produced concussion of the brain."

"Concussion, the deuce! Is that all you know about the thickness of a ducky's skull?" asked Pierce Browning, who had hurried up. "He could not have hit on a safer point.—Let me at him. I know something about concussions."

They fell back a little, while Pierce bent over to examine the boy.

Meanwhile Black Bess had stopped of her own accord, when she found she was no longer pushed by competing horses. The intelligent creature stood striving to look backward, as if anxious to know what had become of her driver.

"Come, lass; come, honey!" cried Pomp, seizing her bridle, and stroking her soothingly with his large hand. "Neber was sich a knowin' hoss. Got more sense nor half de humans I's eber see'd. Come, sweetheart; you's got de race, an' dat Lady Clare ain't no warh."

He led the horse gently toward the sheds, followed by an admiring crowd.

"Has anybody got a flask of whisky?" asked Pierce, after examining the boy.

If he had asked for a pistol at a western barbecue he could not have been better served. "Pocket pistols," loaded with whisky "warranted to kill at so many paces," appeared on all sides, and at least a dozen were thrust toward his hand.

"This will do," remarked Pierce, with a laugh. "I don't want to bathe the boy in whisky."

He poured a few drops from an open flask down Pete's throat. It had a magical effect. A long-drawn sigh came from the boy, whose eyes opened the next instant, gazing wildly upward.

"How do you feel, Pete?" cried Will, anxiously bending over him.

"Kinder scrumptious," returned the boy, whose senses were rapidly coming back. "What's de row?"

"You got thrown in the race, that's all."

Pete looked up in his master's face with a glance of sudden intelligence.

"Lawsee! I know it all now. Black Bess didn't git beat? Don't nobody say she did!"

"No," replied the judge, "she won the race."

"Knowned she would," broke in Pete. "What's her time?"

"She made it in 2:19 1/4."

"Hoopee!" cried the boy, in a feeble tone of triumph. "Got a bet on dat. A jack-knife gin a pair of ole boots. Dat jack-knife's mine."

"Do you feel sick still?"

"Nary sick. I's all right," returned Pete, scramb-

ling to his feet. "Can't kill dis little nig so easy as dat."

"But what was the matter, Pete? What sickened you in the race?" anxiously inquired Will.

"I dunno. Felt like 'sif a streak of greased lightning' was boring holes all froo me. Hung out 's long's I could. It was dem all-fired peanuts dat de parson gub me, sure's you lib."

This remark elicited some further questions, in which the whole story of the tract distributor came out. Pete still had some of the nuts in his pocket. One or two of these, on close examination, proved to have been split open, and neatly gummed together again, while the kernels had been treated with some substance that gave them a yellowish hue.

"The infernal rascals!" cried Pierce indignantly. "They have been trying to sicken the boy and throw him out of the race. Wouldn't I like to have hold of that parson!—Do you feel sick still, my boy?"

"Not much. If nobody's got no 'jections I's gwine to take a scoot roun' arter dat parson. Jess want to gib him back his track, you see;—an' de rest ob his peanuts."

But the parson was already out of the grounds, making his way, with a pair of sadly disappointed confederates, toward the home of Luke Lister.

All their schemes had failed, and Black Bess had proved too much for her foes.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CAPTURE AND A RESCUE.

"THAT was a rascally close clip," remarked Pierce Browning, as he, in company with Will Wildfire and Ben Huntly, made his way toward Wildflower Hall. "It is a mercy that Black Bess was not thrown. Your friends, whoever they were, worked hard in the effort."

"I told you she would win, if she only had a fair chance," replied Will. "I knew it was in her."

"I fancy the pair of you were of that notion, by the way you have been backing her," remarked Ben. "You must have realized a pretty penny from your bets."

"A trifle of ten thousand or so," rejoined Will, with affected indifference.

Pierce smiled quietly, and said nothing.

"And the conspirators must have lost accordingly; for I know that Mark Preston laid some heavy wagers against your horse. There is no doubt that he is at the bottom of this business."

"And of another business, if I am not mistaken," remarked Will.

"What business is that?"

"I refer to those burglaries. Nobody but he arranged that attempt on Miss Moreland's house; for the stolen papers would be of use to nobody else. That is the next task to be accomplished, the recovery of those stolen documents."

Will's lips were set with a firm energy that showed it would go hard with Mark Preston, should they once come to a personal encounter.

"I would not trust him half as far as a man could fling an elephant," rejoined Pierce. "But what is wrong yonder? Isn't that Pete beckoning to us as if his arms were the sails of a windmill?"

"Pete? So it is: There is something wrong there. That is Luke Lister's house."

They had nearly reached the summit of the Darby-road ascent, when they thus perceived the little ebony jockey frantically beckoning to them. He stood in front of Luke Lister's habitation, and made the most earnest efforts to induce them to hasten their movements.

"Hi!" he exclaimed, in prudently subdued accents. "Hurry up dar. Stir up yer hosses. Yere's de berry debil broke loose, suah!"

The three friends rode rapidly up at this energetic summons. Before reaching the house they heard sounds of a struggle and of excited voices, which ceased as they approached.

"What is the matter, Pete?"

"Murder, I spect. Or sunfin wuss," Pete seriously replied. "I jess got yere, a minute ago, comin' cross lots, and dar's been de ridiculouslest time in dat house you eber heerd. Spect de furniture's all mashed into toothpicks."

Springing hastily from their horses, and throwing Pete the reins, the three friends rushed quickly to the house, from which some sounds very much like oaths were yet issuing.

But we must go back a little, to seek the source of this wild uproar.

When Mark Preston, Luke Lister, and the parson, left the grounds of the race-course, it was with curses at their ill-success, while each accused the other of negligence in his part of the scheme.

"Hang it all, the boy ate the nuts!" exclaimed the parson. "It isn't my fault if they were so slow in working. I didn't doctor them, or I'd have made them double him up sooner."

"The little hound must have a nickel-plated stomach," replied Luke. "He took in enough medicine to bring down any reasonable Christian before the first quarter was made. It wouldn't have answered to overdo it, and salt him before the race started."

"I don't care what the blazes was the trouble," cried Mark, indignantly; "all I know is, you've salted me by your tricks. I've bucked against Black Bess with nearly every cent I had in the world—and it's all gone to the dogs."

"Hang it all! I'm no better off," retorted Luke. "They've just wiped me out. I'll have to realize on some of the stock left me by my uncle, to make things even."

He gave a knowing wink, which the others seemed to appreciate.

"For your part, you have the papers presented you by your aunt," he continued, turning to Mark.

"That's so," said Mark, half drawing a package

of papers from a side pocket. "There's money in them. And if I don't make that proud jade wince before I am done with her, it's odd."

A sinister smile marked his face as he turned his horse toward the city, and gave him the rein.

"Be on your guard," he called back to Luke. "Remember what I told you. It won't be two days before they track you out. You had best vamoose the ranch, instanter."

"I have my plans laid for to-morrow," replied Luke. "The stars can hardly come down on me before that time. After to-morrow morning they will find an empty house waiting for them."

Mark rode off at an easy pace, his wounded arm preventing him from attempting any rapid movement. His two confederates stood still conversing. After some time thus spent they were joined by a third, an ill-looking, raw-boned fellow, who seemed in their full confidence.

Finally, after the conclusion of the race, the three men started across the fields toward Luke's residence, which was not very far distant.

Luke was on the point of throwing open the back door of the house, and boldly entering, when some peculiar noises from within made him pause. He recognized the voice of his wife, who was expressing her opinion of some one in what seemed no complimentary terms.

Making a warning signal to his companions, he moved slyly around the corner of the building to a side window, which he found standing wide open. Climbing noiselessly through this, he advanced on tiptoe to the door of the room which he had entered.

His wife was still scolding in a loud, rasping voice, though no answer came from the person to whom she addressed her complimentary harangue. Eventually, however, his patience appeared to give way, and he growled out:

"By the Lord, woman! I'll put a gag on your tongue as well as on your hands, if you don't lay a curb on your eloquence."

"You will, will you? Blast your eyes!" cried a loud voice near him.

Before he could defend himself he received a fierce blow between the eyes from Luke Lister's heavy fist, which knocked him prostrate to the floor.

This sudden entrance of the man to the house was followed by that of his two comrades. Luke flung himself on the slyly-built detective, whom he had taken so by surprise, while his comrades quickly removed the bonds by which his wife was confined to a chair.

"Here, give us the end of that rope, and we'll truss up this turkey!" cried Luke, whose prisoner was struggling vigorously to escape.

A yell of alarm broke from the lips of the latter, followed by a fierce blow from Luke's heavy hand upon his mouth.

"Do you want your head split open?" savagely growled the villain, as he knelt on the breast of his captive. "Maybe you don't know who you're fooling with!"

"There's another of them up-stairs!" cried the woman. "Look out for him, Luke!"

Luke started up with a curse, leaving his captive to the hands of his two comrades. There was a quick, fierce struggle, but they succeeded in binding him hand and foot, while the master of the house ran quickly up-stairs.

The noise of the struggle had not failed to alarm Jack Brace, who was again engaged in investigating the burglars' store-room.

He ran quickly down-stairs, appearing at the head of the lower flight a moment after Luke had passed that point. It needed not Frank's warning cry. A glance was enough to show what had occurred.

"Release him! or hang me if I don't drop the pair of you!" yelled Jack, covering the parson and his rawboned associate with the muzzle of a revolver. "You didn't calculate to get the whip hand of Jack Brace so easy as that? If you did, I fancy you've made a slight mistake."

"Devil the mistake!" came a voice behind him, and the heavy fist of Luke Lister fell like a sledge-hammer on the back of his head.

The assault was so unexpected and so violent that Jack lost his balance and was hurled like a catapult headlong down the stairs, the pistol flying from his hand, and striking with a heavy thud against the front door.

Before he could rise again the two men had flung themselves upon him, and a sharp struggle ensued, Jack being noted for his vigor and activity.

But he had been hurt and confused by his fall, and even before Luke could descend to the aid of his companions, they had secured their prisoner, twisting tightly around his arms the remainder of the rope with which Frank had been bound.

Jack lay, breathing heavily, and glaring with angry eyes at his conquerors.

"A pair of housebreakers, eh! Lucky we came to hand in time," remarked Luke, with a sneering scowl. "It is not often that fishermen get caught so nicely on their own lines."

"Pile in," growled Jack. "It's your turn now. Make the most of it. But I've a notion you'll find you've caught a Tartar, before you're through with this little game."

"Then we'd best skin our Tartar, while we've got him," retorted Luke. "Where are your friends? Why don't you whistle them up?"

"They don't need whistling," replied Jack, with a meaning smile.

He had caught some sounds outside which the others had not heard. As he spoke the front door of the house opened, giving entrance to Will Wildfire and his two friends, who stood looking with momentary doubt upon the scene.

"Will Wildfire! Hell's blazes!" cried Luke, glaring at the intruder.

"In the name of the law, gentlemen," exclaimed Jack. "We are officers, who have been overcome in our duty by these rogues. We call on you for rescue."

"Rescue's the word!" ejaculated Will, springing forward. "And here's one good blow for Black Bess, on the bound who tried to poison her."

Luke attempted to defend himself from the blow, but Will's fist fell, straight as a plummet, on his temple, knocking him to the floor as heavily as if he had been a log.

Simultaneously Pierce stepped forward and grasped the parson by the collar with his two hands, lifting him from the floor as if he weighed no more than a leaf, and holding him for a moment suspended, while a mocking smile curled his handsome lips.

"A sort of cat and mouse business, isn't it?" he said.

Meanwhile Ben Huntly had disposed of the third, clasping him in a close wrestle, which ended, after a minute, in the villain being heavily flung.

"Dat's him! Dat's him!" screamed Pete, appearing at this minute at the door.

"That's who?"

"De little one. Dat's de parson who gub me de peanuts and de track."

"The deuce you say!" returned Pierce, loosing his prisoner, while at the same moment he gave him a dexterous trip, causing him to measure his length on the floor.

"Sure's you lib it's him. An' what's more I's got dat track yet—and some of dem peanuts. I eat my share ob 'em. He's got to masticate de balance."

"No, no!" cried the parson, with a shudder.

"The boy is right," laughed Pierce, setting his foot on his prisoner. "Tit for tat is a fair game. He shall digest the peanuts and the track if I have to drive them down his throat with a force-pump."

CHAPTER XVIII.

DOCTORING THE PARSON.

A FEW few minutes only have elapsed since the date of our last chapter, but there have occurred several important changes in the situation. The two officers have been released from their bonds, and in their place the three villains now lie, securely bound, and watched with a look of cynical satisfaction by the men who so lately seemed completely in their toils.

"By Jupiter, gentlemen!" exclaimed Jack Brace, "I don't know where you have had your education in fist logic, but when you hit something gives way. I never saw a neater knock-down argument than that which floored our friend here, Mr. Phil Handy."

"Phil Handy?" asked Will, in surprise.

"Yes. The chap that felt the wind of your knuckles. That is the name he sails under."

"He travels under false colors, then," replied Will.

"His real name is Luke Lister."

"Luke Lister! Whew!" whistled the detective, looking keenly into the scowling face of his victim. "So! That smells of business. Why, I've been wanting a man of his inches these six months, and didn't know where to nail him."

"It's an infernal lie!" growled Luke. "There's not a warrant against me."

"I hope it will do your heart good to keep thinking so," rejoined Jack, coolly. "At any rate this burglary business will settle your hash, without raking up any old scores."

"What is that?" asked Will, eagerly.

"I only mean that we've nailed here the night-hawks who have been making things lively these six months. And have struck, in this retired mansion, a well-selected assortment of contraband goods."

"I knew it!" cried Will, energetically. "It was they that robbed Miss Moreland's house."

"I should rather fancy so, since we traced them by the horse which they left behind on that interesting occasion."

A deep curse came from the lips of more than one of the baffled villains, on learning how they had been trapped.

"Then they have got the stolen papers!" exclaimed Will. "The documents which are such a serious loss to Miss Moreland."

"No doubt of it," said Jack.

A mocking smile curled Luke's lips.

"I hope you will find them," he sarcastically said.

"We have got the whip hand of you in that, at any rate."

"Not much," broke in Pierce. "We know where they are, which is as good as having them."

"Where?"

"In Mark Preston's possession."

A quick change of expression came upon Luke's face, which Pierce did not fail to observe. It was followed, however, by a dogged look.

"Mark Preston is not in the business," he replied. "You've got us nailed, I suppose. But I'll bet you high you don't get us to sell out our friends."

"Maybe the pious-looking gentleman may be kinder," remarked Pierce, referring to the parson. "I think he will tell us whether or not Mark Preston has those papers."

"Much I will," was the obstinate answer. "I am not taking any such taffy."

"G'in him de peanuts," cried Pete. "Dat's de sort of med'cine he wants."

"That is just what I am going to do," Pierce coolly announced. "I've a notion, after he has swallowed a reasonable dose of them his memory will come back."

"No, no!" exclaimed the alarmed villain. "I will not take them."

"Perhaps not; but I have a notion you will," replied Pierce, with inflexible determination. "Hand out the provender, Pete. If he don't tell where those papers are, hang me if I don't load him with

every kernel of those nuts, and ram down the tract for wadding. I think he needs to digest his own observations on the sin of gambling."

A look of nervous apprehension came upon the parson's face. He set his teeth firmly, as if determined not to swallow the obnoxious dose.

"The gentleman is going to resist," said Pierce, kneeling over him. "Lend me your knife, Ben, till I force open his teeth. Have you the nuts ready, Pete?"

The boy, his face radiant with impish delight, had been eagerly picking out the doctored nuts from the sound ones. He opened the former and extracted the yellowish stained kernels.

"I's got de provender," announced Pete, grinning. "Lawsee! won't he squirm when he gits a dose of thunder an' lightnin' inside him? Guess what's good fur de jockey is good fur de parson."

The face of the latter showed intense distaste and dread. He strove vigorously to keep his teeth clenched, but the strong blade which Pierce forcibly thrust between them soon wrenched them open.

"Don't give in," warned Luke. "It will all be over in five minutes, and then we can laugh at them."

"Will it?" asked Pierce, sarcastically. "Maybe not. It is not so far away to a drug store, my dear sir. If this dose don't work we will try some others. There are such agreeable mixtures as ipecac, and croton oil, and cowitch and some other charming applications. If nothing else serves I will do up the parson, from head to foot, in mustard plasters, and lay him by till he comes to his senses."

All this was spoken with such cold-blooded firmness and deliberation, that a shudder ran through the frame of the parson, and cold sweats broke out all over him. He held up his hand pleadingly.

"Don't let him slide!" screamed Pete. "He done dosed me, and he's got to swaller dem peanuts, or dar'll be sumfin bu'st."

"Are you ready to confess?" asked Pierce.

"If you do, I will murder you!" yelled Luke.

"All right. Let me have the nuts, Pete.—If they don't bring him around, I will send you over to the drug store."

The parson's hand was again lifted, while a convulsive dread marked his face.

"I will confess," he cried.

"If you do—" Luke again threateningly began. But his speech was abruptly ended by Jack Brace's heavy hand, which descended upon his lips.

Pierce withdrew his knife blade from the parson's teeth.

"Mark Preston has got the papers," he cried.

"Where?" asked Will, eagerly.

"In his pocket. He showed them to us not an hour ago."

"Good!" exclaimed Will, jumping hastily to his feet. "And we saw him jogging back to Philadelphia. We can overtake him, if we ride hard. Where are the horses, Pete?"

"I luff 'em outside, hitched up to de fence palin's."

"Come, boys, then. We must be short, sharp, and decisive."

"And if this proves a lie, I will not forget you," said Pierce, with a threatening gesture toward his prisoner.

"I'll swear he had them an hour ago," asseverated the latter, earnestly.

There was a look of intense disapproval on Pete's face as he followed his master out to the fence, where the horses were patiently waiting.

"Dat's all mighty nice fur you gemmen," he growled, discontentedly. "You's got what you want, I s'pose. But I dunno as I's paid up fur de thunder an' lightnin' in my internals. I ain't let up on dat parson yit, nohow."

Jack Brace and his comrade followed their rescuers out, requesting them to send a certain telegram to the city from Paschalville. Here was an opportunity for Pete. Quick as a flash he stole back to the house. The three prisoners had taken advantage of the momentary absence of their captors, and were engaged in a conversation, in which threats and curses formed the chief part.

"You can blow till you're blind," said the parson, angrily. "That chap meant business, and I don't believe you would have stood making a drug store of your stomach, any better than I did. Do you suppose I wanted to be griped like that infernal nigger was, when he fell from the sulky?"

The parson made a slight error in opening his mouth for this speech, for before he could close it again, several hard substances were dropped into it, almost choking him as they lodged in his throat. "Ya! ya!" laughed Pete, in intense glee. "De 'fernal nigger's got de game now. We'll see how de parson lubs doctored peanuts."

Coughing, choking, and screaming with fear and rage, the bound prisoner managed to roll over on his side, and to eject the distasteful morsels, but not until every portion of the powerful drug with which they were anointed had passed down his throat.

His struggles and the panic of dread which affected him only hastened the operation of the medicine, and when the detectives returned, after their short absence, it was to find the parson squirming over the floor, yelling with severe pain, and occasionally double-up to a greater degree than Pete had been in the sulky.

As for the latter individual, he was simply wild with glee, rolling over the floor in paroxysms of laughter, while yells of impish delight echoed the screams of agony from his victim.

"Hallo!" cried Jack Brace, on beholding the unexpected scene. "What is going on here?"

"Nothin'," returned Pete, "only I've gub de doctor a dose ob his own medicine. Didn't he physic me fur de hoss-race? Jess you bet it's Pete's turn now."

And the boy burst out again into his wild fits of laughter, rolling and clapping his hands with delight.

Meanwhile the three horsemen were pushing at a

lively pace over the road toward the city. Few words passed between them, but their lips were set and their eyes flashing at the hope of at last bringing the leading villain to his well-deserved punishment. On Will's face particularly this stern expression rested, and he spurred his horse with cruel energy as he thought of the object before him.

They halted for a few minutes at Paschalville. When they set out again they were accompanied by a mounted officer, bearing a warrant for the arrest of Mark Preston.

The sun was getting low in the western sky when they reached the borders of the built-up portion of the city. They had gained the long wall of Woodland Cemetery when they first perceived, at a considerable distance in advance, a horseman, who, as they could plainly make out, carried his right arm in a sling.

"Our game, for a thousand!" cried Pierce. "He is jogging along, to save his arm. We will come on him like a thunderbolt."

They were very close at hand before the horseman in advance seemed to hear their rapid approach. He then looked around, showing the expected visage of Mark Preston. A strange expression shot over his face. His first impulse appeared to be to put his horse to its speed. But a second thought showed him that this was useless.

"Halt!" cried Will, sternly. "We have a slight matter of business with you, Mr. Mark Preston."

"I have none with you," Mark haughtily replied, paying no attention to this peremptory order.

In the next instant Pierce had vigorously grasped his bridle, near the bit, and was facing him with a stern expression.

"Do your duty," he said, to the officer.

"What does this outrage mean?" asked Mark, in fierce accents. "Who dares stop me on the public highway?"

"I do," replied the officer, "by virtue of this warrant of arrest."

"It is all up, my good sir," remarked Ben Huntly.

"Your pals have blown on you, and we will rake you in as the ringleader of a gang of burglars."

"It is a lie!" screamed Mark. "I defy you to prove it!"

"We shall see about that!" cried Will, seizing him by the arm. "Search him, officer."

Mark made a fierce effort to escape, but he was held as if in a vise. In an instant more the alert fingers of the officer had extracted a thick packet of papers from the inside pocket of the prisoner's coat, and held them up to Will's inspection.

"Good! They are the papers!" cried the latter. "Do you keep them in charge for the present, and conduct your prisoner to the nearest magistrate's office, where we will prefer our charges against him."

Mark Preston's pale face grew lividly pallid as the small cavalcade turned and made its way toward the office of a justice, the hand of the officer firmly clasp the bridle of the prisoner's horse.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN HOUR BEFORE THE FIRE.

A CHEERFUL fire burned in the open grate in the pleasant sitting-room of Miss Moreland's residence. The surroundings were delightful. The mantle of rose-streaked marble, with its delicate bronze figures, and the magnificent Sevres vase in its center, the soft tints of the walls and carpet, the flow of fleecy curtains, the attractive pictures, the display of richly-bound books on the center-table, gave the room an aspect of charm and comfort combined, which was not detracted from by the figure of the beautiful mistress of the house, clad in tender grays, and nestling in her soft arm-chair before the glowing fire.

A warm color was upon her cheeks which doubled her beauty. A soft lustre filled her eyes; her lips were half parted. Evidently some pleasant thoughts were flowing unchecked through her brain.

"If it could be!" she murmured; and then turned suddenly, the warm blood flowing up to cheek and brow.

For there stood the form of him who had evidently been in her thoughts, the erect figure and frank face of Will Wildfire. He had just entered, and remained with his hat in his hand, gazing admiringly on the charming tableau before him.

"If you knew what a picture you were making you would never have stirred," he said. "I would give more than a penny for the thoughts which filled your mind just now."

They are not for sale," was her laughing and blushing response. "But I am so glad to see you. Let me have your hat.—Here, take this seat. You look cold. Come up close to the fire."

"I am not so cold but that your warm welcome will serve to drive away the chill," he gallantly replied.

"And I have got something for you more cheering than even a coal fire," he continued, as he took the chair she had set in front of the grate.

"Something for me!" cried Clara eagerly, drawing her chair near his, and nestling again in its soft depths. "What is it? Do tell me at once. You know I can never bear to wait."

"But you must wait," laughed Will. "I shall not encourage any such childish impatience."

"Of course I am childish," she quickly responded. "But I want it at once."

"No doubt you do. But suppose I am not ready to give it at once?"

"Oh! I don't care! I don't want it at all," she petulantly replied, drawing herself back in her chair, and looking the picture of disdain.

But she could not keep up this mood for a minute. The amused smile on Will's face was followed by a quick burst of laughter from her.

"You are too bad!" she exclaimed. "Give it to me, at once!"

"Not till you give me something in return," he said, in a quieter tone, though the smile still played about his lips.

She looked at him an instant, with inquiring eyes, and then fell back in her chair, her gaze fixed upon the fire, while a tinge of color came into her cheeks like a reflection from the flame.

For a minute not a word passed between them. The smile faded from Will's lips, and was replaced by an earnest look.

"You know what I mean," he began, taking her hand, which was not withdrawn. "It is not the first time, Clara, that I have dared—" He hesitated.

"What is it you have brought me?" she asked, in a changed tone.

"I have brought you my love!" he exclaimed. "The honest devotion of a young heart, but a true one, Clara."

He had drawn his chair nearer hers, and was looking eagerly into her flushed face and sparkling eyes.

"And I know you return it," he declared, capturing her other hand. "I know my love is not given in vain, for you have told me—"

"I have told you that we were only boy and girl, and too young to think of such things," she replied. But she left her hands in his, and partly turned her face from his earnest gaze.

"We are not too young to love!" he cried. "And I know you love me, Clara! Say that you love me!"

"What have you brought me, Will?"

"I will not tell you till you say that you love me!"

Her eyes, bright but suffused, turned again slowly to his; the pink in her cheek deepened and spread; her lips slightly parted. For a minute they sat looking at each other thus, his face intense with eagerness, hers soft with emotion. Then she spoke.

"I love you."

They needed but to bend further toward each other, and their lips met, in the long, clinging, first kiss of love, while their sparkling eyes looked into each other as into two lakes of infinite trust and love. Will's arm had slipped around her slender waist, and they sat thus for many minutes, lost in each other, and oblivious to all the world without.

Nearly an hour had passed ere Clara returned again to her first question:

"What is it you have brought me, Will?"

"Myself," he replied, with a smiling look.

"No, no; there is something else," she quickly replied. "It is not fair in you after all—after—"

"After your giving yourself to me in return," he rejoined, with another kiss. "Yes, I have brought you something, Clara. I will not keep you in suspense any longer."

Her eyes burned with eagerness as he slowly drew from his pocket a closed package. Removing the enveloping cover he held it up before her eyes.

"My lost papers!" she ejaculated, quickly seizing it. "That is too fortunate! Where in the world did you get them? Have the burglars been caught? Who were they? Do tell me all immediately!"

"They have been captured," he replied. "And it was as we supposed."

"Mark Preston?"

"Yes, and his confederate, Luke Lister, the English sport."

"I knew it!" she exclaimed, excitedly. "This is too good! You do not know what these are worth to me. They are the proofs on which my possession of my whole fortune rests. Mark Preston might have beggared me.—How shall I ever repay you?"

"You have repaid me," he replied, looking at her with a warm meaning in his eyes.

She returned his gaze for a moment, and then threw her arms impulsively around his neck, kissing him with loving fervor on the lips.

"I love you, dear Will!" she cried. "I shall love you, for ever and ever and ever."

And we will leave them so, before that flashing glow, their hearts warmer than the fire on the hearth, their young love adding the last charm needed to make the room a perfect nest of delight.

And here our story ends. We have but some loose threads to take up, some frayed ends of plot, to give a finish to the tale through which our readers have so kindly accompanied us.

Of course the burglars got their deserts. The whole party of them were sent to the penitentiary for terms of imprisonment ranging from five to ten years. Add to this the failure of all the schemes of the ringleaders, the loss of the heavy wagers they had laid against Black Bess, the recovery of Clara Moreland's papers, and it may be seen that with them the path of crime did not run smooth, but that retribution followed wrong-doing with swift and steady course.

Our other friends are all active and well-doing. Pete remains in charge of Black Bess, who has won other races since her memorable victory at Suffolk Park.

Old Pomp still hangs out at the Bell, the established oracle of the race-course for all the country round.

As for Pierce Browning he is enjoying life in the same listless, easy-going way as ever. He is continually telling his friends that he expects soon to marry and settle down; but no one has yet seen any evidence of his intention to do so.

Ben Huntly is occupied now in training for the Fall races of the Schuylkill navy, being as eager a boatman as ever, and as fond of sport in every shape.

As for Will Wildfire he is not yet married. Clara has declared that they are both too young yet, though it is whispered that the happy day is not far off.

And meanwhile he keeps open house to his friends at Wildflower Hall, whose old rafters ring with the songs and merry laughter of many a jovial party.

THE END.

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